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A LIFE IN PIECES



A TRILOGY OF NOVELLAS
FEATURING NEW STORIES BY

DAVE STONE
PAUL SUTTON &
JOSEPH LIDSTER

**BIG
FINISH**

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SUMMERFIELD
A LIFE IN PIECES

A Trilogy of Novellas by

**Dave Stone,
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Three brand new novellas...



A LIFE IN PIECES

A trilogy of novellas featuring new stories by
DAVE STONE
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Zardox Break by Dave Stone

The Purpura Pawn by Paul Sutton

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Bernice Summerfield is an archaeologist from the twenty-seventh century. She is also fundamentally sane, which helps if you're travelling with people frequently on the edge of a nervous breakdown and others drifting towards the psychopathic. She's a party animal, revered on at least two planets as a goddess of indiscriminate drinking. She's also insecure enough to fake her academic credentials, emotional enough still to ache from her first romantic betrayal, sufficiently moral to regard her mentor's actions sceptically, and straightforward enough to tell him what she thought of him (most memorably in the outburst, 'Git! Git! Git!').

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*Adapted from an essay by
Lloyd Rose*

I Zardox Break

Dave Stone

Prologue

The colony-planet of Banjax was hardly unique in the greater galactic scheme of things, precisely because it was unique in certain respects.

That isn't the oxymoron it might first appear. The fact is that almost every human-colonised planet in the known galactic spiral arm is still in a sufficiently basic state of development that it has a single actual settlement. Marsoomia has the Marsoomia Settlement. Fiddler's Elbow just has Fiddler's Elbow. The planet Banjax – of course – has simply Banjax. And so on, and so forth.

These aren't worlds with a history like Earth or the Proximan Chain, where one can move from one entire culture to another when one moves from street to street. These are worlds consisting of a single actual place, with a population of maybe a couple of million apiece.

This makes them relatively easy to manage – certainly, easier to manage than even a single city on Earth, or a Zone on the Proximan Chain. It also makes it far more likely that they'll get a bee (or local insectoid equivalent) in their bonnets about some one particular thing.

Thus, for example, the once fecund colony-planet of Robertalein was founded on the principles of unrestricted gun-ownership and the universe helping those who helped themselves. Plans are afoot to colonise Robertalein again, the very minute the last survivor stops dry-firing into the air, shouting 'Mine! It's all mine! *Heeheeheeheehee!*' and finally keels over and expires from starvation.

Likewise when the People's Paradise That is Not Remotely Any Kind of Gulag at All of Prokti colony attempted to institute a Dedicated and Glorious Five Year Food Production Plan, modelled on half-remembered stories of early twentieth-century Soviet Russia, it only occurred to them that they might need something to eat during the interim after all their resources had been sunk into the scheme and it was too late.

The unique peculiarity of Banjax lay in its financial systems, which operated by a process of 'micro-taxing': an attempt to bring fairness to the notoriously unfair world of commerce.

The process was simple enough in theory. To take the example of smoking: every single credit raised from tobacco-tax went to funding either treatment for smoking-related diseases or programmes to encourage smokers to give up. Thus, in theory, the more people smoked, the greater the forces against smoking, and so these various forces and pressures compensated for each other and achieved dynamic equilibrium.

And as with smoking, so with alcohol and other drugs, with saturated fats and handguns and for that matter anything else that

might be detrimental to human health. The money gathered from the bad is spent on converting the effects to good. Forces striving for balance.

That, of course, was the theory. The reality was somewhat different – as should be obvious given so much as half a moment's thought.

The fact is, simply, that individual human beings were caught in the middle of these enormous forces and pressures. And individual human beings are terribly easy to tear apart or crush.

The point of the above, so far as our story is concerned, lies with an eleven year-old boy named Humphrey Pumpkin. And from the name alone, one can see that this not going to be a particularly happy story.

What made it doubly cruel, one must suppose, was the coincidental congruity between the name and Humphrey's problem – an addiction to fat-rich fast foods combined with a pronounced and congenital tendency toward obesity.

On Banjax, tax-credits from fast food were sunk into an organisation known as the FBI. The initials stood for what the founders had called – in a spectacularly insensitive attempt to ape the crudities of youth-speak, the Fat Bastard Initiative.

Subsequent toning-down of the name (the letterheads already having been printed) to Fat Bloater Initiative, was also a failure, and now the organisation was known by its initials and nothing more.

In any event, when young Humphrey Pumpkin was admitted to the FBI for treatment, a thorough investigation of his addiction was performed, and it was learned that he was not addicted to fast food at all.

He was in fact addicted to the limited but complementary GalNet service available from the Mister Meaty chain of burger-franchises – and had been stuffing himself with Mister Meaties day and night for the privilege of using it. Had stuffing yourself sick not been the price of getting online, it is somewhat doubtful whether Humphrey Pumpkin would have remembered to eat at all.

And this, of course, is where the system of micro-taxing and micro-funding failed. The FBI had no remit or interest in treating Humphrey's unhealthy fascination with GalNet. They were only interested in stopping him porking out on burgers.

So the simple solution was to give him a dedicated GalNet line, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, and let him get on with it.

And the years passed...

One

‘Well, this is nice,’ said Bernice Summerfield, twiddling her thumbs and looking around the spacious and tastefully sumptuous chamber. ‘This is very nice indeed. Nice, nice, nice, nice, nice. It’s very nice.’

This was her first ever time travelling via the PanGalactically Linking Outer Spatial Service, largely on account of having never in her life been able to afford the extortionate tariff. Even in the times when she’d been on, supposedly, ‘unlimited’ expenses, various financial-control systems had taken one look at the request and informed her, rather snottily, that there were far better things to do with the money – curing hunger and disease on any small planet of her choice, say – and she should be thoroughly ashamed of herself for even considering it.

This had been fair enough with Benny – she’d just been idly curious as to what could possibly be worth that kind of money. Something with a price-tag like that, even if it was only worth a fraction of the price, must be very special indeed.

As it turned out, however, it wasn’t.

PanGLOSS (*The Best Way of Travelling to All Possible Worlds!*) catered for a particular and specific variety of the ultra-rich: those who wanted no truck whatsoever with the hazardous and uncomfortable business of space travel while still, basically, travelling in space.

The chamber in which Benny now sat, watching pristine-suited waiters as they discreetly served the other occupants to the accompaniment of tinkly music, seemed no more remarkable than any high-priced salon one might encounter on any number of worlds, given suitable introductory means... until you realised that the room was in the centre of a five-mile-wide globe of stabilising and compensatory mechanisms, designed for the sole purpose of suppressing the faintest inkling that you were hurtling through space in a starship under infradrive.

The law of diminishing returns, of course, was what made this mode of travel so hideously expensive – it was quashing that last micron of pitch and yaw that was the bugger. All it did for Benny, though, was remove the last breath of the various sensations that made her enjoy spaceflight in the first place, leaving her bored out of her skull.

‘Nice, nice, nice, nice, nice,’ she said again. ‘It’s all so nice, in fact, that I fear I may have to throw up.’

She became aware that, swiftly and discreetly, a pleasingly designed yet copious porcelain bowl had been placed on the small table beside her. She regarded it for a moment, then turned to the waiter standing

there and seemingly all oblivious.

‘I didn’t mean that literally,’ she said. ‘I think I might just be getting a bit of a head.’

As if in response to a connection of ideas, the doors in the far wall opened, and Jason Kane stumbled out from the rest rooms, to which he had repaired to deal with one of the migraines that had been plaguing him recently. Benny looked at his somewhat shambling form with a kind of not entirely unmixed pleasure.

It was not that Jason Kane was looking particularly scruffy and seedy – no scruffier and seedier than he usually looked, anyway. It was just that he entirely failed to fit with the surroundings and their perfectly-costumed, micro-manicured and overpreened inhabitants.

Even at this distance, Benny could see the small bit he had missed when shaving that morning, the tiny mole to one side of his nose, the button missing off his shirt. The minor imperfections that come from simply being human and alive, made all the more noticeable by the sheer environmental contrast – it was like seeing some scrofulous, unshaven lout dropped in amongst the smooth and flawless models of a fashion shoot.

Of course, the unshaven lout at a fashion shoot is usually the photographer and thus the most important person there. Now, if he’s only remembered, Benny thought, to check his boots for errant lengths of toilet paper...

Jason, indeed, seemed somewhat ill-at-ease, rubbing at the side of his face and neck. Was it her imagination – or was that really the motion people use when cleaning off some suddenly inconvenient lipstick?

How the hell had Jason managed to score in the space of five minutes in a toilet? Well, all right, but here and now, with a thumping migraine and with somebody likely to be wearing lipstick?

Don’t even start down that road, Benny. You know precisely where it leads. It’s just your imagination, nothing more.

They had been wandering through the Skin Arboretum, hand in hand, back in the Collection, when Jason had brought the subject of the trip up:

‘I’m sorry I stormed off like that, before,’ he said, ‘I just needed to go somewhere to try and get my head straight. We’d been really getting on before that, too, what with all the rolling around in bed and doing it and stuff– so I was wondering if I can’t find some way to make it up. What would you say to a week on Zardox?’

‘Zardox?’ Benny said, surprised. ‘I’d be saying, how could we possibly be expected to afford a week on –’

‘Don’t worry about it. Don’t worry about Peter, either. I’ve had a

word with Adrian, and he's more than happy to take care of him.'

Idly, Benny watched as a particularly fine specimen of a Quason flenser-pod caught sight of her, launched itself directly at her face, hit the reinforced plexiglass of its enclosure hard enough to make it judder, and slid down it with a squeak.

'Oh, yes?' she said. 'Let me guess how that went. "Look after the kid would you, Adrian, while I go off and knob his mother for a week on the most expensive resort-planet in the galaxy?"'

Jason shrugged. 'Not in so many words. Actually, who am I kidding, it was pretty much exactly in those words. He agreed to help out in the end, though, after he calmed down.'

'That was nice of him.' Benny made a mental note to check if Adrian was all right. There was every probability that Jason was just playing up to type – but then again, there was always the chance that he was not.

'In any case,' she continued, 'you never answered the question. How on earth are we supposed to afford something like that?'

'I've got a little something put away,' Jason said. 'Little bit here, little bit there, it all adds up. Don't worry, it's good. Would I lie to you?'

Now, abruptly, as though a switch had been thrown, Jason's manner eased and he grinned. Benny found herself grinning in return.

It was one of those things she loved about him, one of those details it was impossible to explain the importance of to anybody else. It wasn't that he was suddenly unaware of his classy and somewhat intimidating surroundings – it was that he simply didn't care.

'Wotcha, cock,' he said to the still discreetly hovering waiter, plonking himself down on the chaise longue beside Benny and putting his feet up on an occasional pouffe – the pouffes had been liberally provided, about the room, for that very purpose; it was just that Jason's booted feet seemed somehow wrong on one of them.

'Bottle of your finest brandy, from wherever your finest brandy comes from,' he ordered imperiously. 'And another one of whatever the young lady's having.'

The waiter glided away in the manner of one barely concealing a sneer. Jason grinned maliciously after him, then turned a rather more friendly smile on Benny.

'Blimey,' he said, in conversational tones which nonetheless seemed to ring around the chamber. 'The bogs in here are something and no mistake. Three sorts of soap, little chap in a hat passing out towels, one of those things you sit on with a faucet. I'm telling you, I didn't know whether to wash my arse or go blind.'

Two

There's a saying to the effect that the Emperor sits down to bacon and eggs at the start of the day like everybody else – if everybody else happens to start the day by sitting down to bacon and eggs. They're just the finest and most expensive bacon and eggs that can be found from all four corners of the Empire.

Wrapped in silk, packed into solid gold egg cartons, hauled across the tundra by mighty teams of oxen and so forth. Salvers and chafing-dishes by Faberge. Serviettes of the finest flax, from especially dedicated fields and mills. Little toast soldiers brevetted to the rank of Field Marshal and whatnot.

The corollary of this, however, is that in the end there is an upper limit to excellence. There is only so much one can do – however splendidly served and expensive the result – with pig meat, salt and something that comes out of a chicken's behind. And the long trip from the corners of this hypothetically rectangular Empire, without refrigeration, has probably not helped much either.

The planet of Zardox lies well away from the main commercial spacelanes, on the other side of the Dagron-Welkes dark-matter field, making it almost impossible to get to in the first place without a dedicated PanGLOSS line. A military craft could reach it easily, of course, military craft not being tied to the spacelanes in any way, but the tactical advantage of acquiring Zardox in any current military conflict would be precisely zero.

Zardox, from space, appears to be a desert. On the surface, it looks like a water-world. This is because, while being primarily covered with water, the seas of Zardox never plumb beneath a few hundred metres and have an average depth of three.

Landmass consists of strings of sandy islets that a temperate climate has contrived to turn into, collectively, a world that humans might dream of as an Island Paradise. Not supernaturally perfect by any means, but certainly nicer than most places in the galaxy, which isn't hard.

The point of our story, so far as Zardox is concerned, began some time after first contact, when a member of a galactographic survey team idly wondered how much it would cost to acquire a particularly pleasant islet for himself. To this end, he asked a member of the dominant species, sunning itself on a nearby promontory, what it might be worth.

The aboriginals of Zardox, plump and somewhat seal-like creatures rejoicing in the name of baskits, had a communally-based culture with

no sense of personal possession or commerce. The basket replied that the tiny island was without price.

Members of galactographic survey teams tend not to be complete and utter morons, so the basket's reply was understood. Over the years, though, the story travelled around the galaxy in an extended game of Squangobulan Butt-whispers, until Zardox came to be, amongst those who didn't know any better, the equivalent of an Eldorado. Possibly even a Shangri La.

It was – so people who didn't know better said – the most beautiful place in the universe. To bathe in its crystal seas was to be rejuvenated. To bathe in the rays of its benign sun was to never have to worry about melanoma ever again. The glorious vista of its beaches, so the story went, required the use of special sunglasses, projecting images of ugly things directly onto the retina, or the brain would simply explode from sheer joy.

All of which, of course, sprang from the human tendency to confuse 'without price' with 'worth more cash than can possibly be imagined' ... a dangerous thing in a galaxy where certain individuals have more cash than can be imagined. It wasn't as if nobody knew where Zardox was; it was there for anybody who might want it – and it was only a matter of time before certain individuals decided to grab it.

A PanGLOSS line was established, literally tunnelling through the dark-matter field and keeping the route clear by means of spatial-stasis rings. The raw materials thus obtained were utilised to build resort-complexes on Zardox itself, exclusively designed by the best architects, landscapers and fungineers that impossibly huge amounts of cash could buy.

The very best of portable, potable and recreational resources were imported from, yes, every corner of the galaxy – and since the inhabited galaxy forms a three-dimensional tesseract as opposed to a hypothetical oblong, that's quite a lot of corners.

The indigenous baskets, incidentally, were dispossessed en masse, and effectively destroyed as a communal culture. We shall hear no more about them.

In the end, these hideously wealthy entrepreneurs found themselves markedly less wealthy, though no less hideous. They looked around at what they had wrought on Zardox, and found that they had hit a snag – the upper limit of excellence, which the reasonably attentive reader will have gleaned from the start.

(It occurs to us, incidentally, that the saying about the Emperor's Bacon and Eggs is completely wrong, and we might have just totally made it all up off the top of our heads. Our advice is: be suitably grateful that people are going to the bother of making things up for you and stop whining.)

In any case, the more general sense of the point holds – emperor or pauper, throne of kings or three-legged stool, when you sit down you're still sitting on your own backside.)

The new Zardox was still very nice, its beaches unspoilt and picturesque, its resort-complexes pristine and gleaming... but it was certainly not the Eldorado or Shangri La of popular report. It was no better than that which might be obtained, more conveniently and far cheaper, on the better-class areas of a thousand worlds throughout the galaxy.

At this point, the developers could have washed their hands of the whole sorry business and left Zardox as yet another monument to failed enterprise: a ghost town inhabited by bemused and culturally contaminated baskits.

The developers, however, went the other way. They funnelled their remaining cash into tweaking the Zardox Resort as far as was physically possible, and upped their prices by a factor of ten.

The end result – to those who know that humanity is infested by those who can't get any joy from being *included* unless others are *excluded* – was obvious.

The very worst thing, Benny thought, was knowing that a five-mile-wide PanGLOSS ship was going through all the hideously complex procedures of pancaking down through a planetary atmosphere, made all the more complicated by the sheer mass of stabilising mechanisms – but those same mechanisms left not the slightest hint that it was doing so.

The other passengers in the chamber were entirely oblivious, but Benny knew deep in her bones what was actually happening, and some part of her was screaming that this total lack of sensation was wrong.

She was white-faced and shaking with tension by the time that absolutely nothing happened save that the access-doors slid back, and a mellifluous chime announced their arrival on Zardox.

Jason Kane had spent the entire trip completely relaxed, sopping up the brandy and getting up the noses of the serving staff in a number of happily spiteful little ways. Now he swung his feet off the pouffe and clambered up.

'Let's go and see what all the fuss is about, shall we?' he said. He seemed cheerful rather than in any way the worse for drink.

Benny debated with herself whether to check the actual level of the bottle from which he had been so ostensibly drinking. In the end she decided not to. It would open up a number of questions either way, and for the moment she simply didn't feel up to it.

The passenger-module had by now, of course, detached itself from

the main mass of the ship and docked with planetside Arrivals, saving the passengers the hardship of a two-and-a-half-mile walk. Benny joined the stream of exiting passengers and strolled out, through a wide and statuary-lined, plush-carpeted hallway that seemed nothing at all like an umbilical, to a well-lit spacious foyer. This was one aspect travelling by PanGLOSS which Benny, who had braved the crush of any number of spaceports over the years, could get entirely behind.

Benny looked around the foyer. Apart from liveried and discreetly welcoming reception staff, there appeared to be no security, or customs officials, or even porters – the prosaic business of luggage being no doubt handled out of sight.

What she did see were several fellow-passengers that she could not recall from the flight. Large men, their suits cut from different kinds of cloth for the sake of variety, but each of a cut that concealed the muscle underneath.

They radiated a kind of restrained affability. They were perfectly friendly. There was nothing threatening about them at all.

One of them came over to Benny and tried to strike up a conversation.

‘It’s all quite splendid, isn’t it?’ he said. Not the sort of thing we get at home. Are you staying here long?’

‘Only a week, I think,’ said Benny.

She suddenly realised that she’d lost track of Jason. She didn’t want to look around at this point to locate him, but she could sense, in the way that one does with a loved one, that he wasn’t close.

‘Look, let’s just drop the pretence for a moment, shall we?’ she said. ‘I know what your job is, and I know that I’ve somehow managed to put up a couple of flags. Probably by not being manicured and coiffed to a millimetre of my life and couriered out the bum. You’ve probably opened a file on me as we speak, so let’s just get on to the infraction of my rights as a private citizen, please.’

The man’s manner changed from affability to one of barely concealed irritation. He plucked at his ear, no doubt listening to the data streamed into it from an implant.

‘Your place of origin is the Braxiatel Collection,’ he said. ‘Quite a bit of trouble there, recently. Quite a bit of... terrorist activity.’

Benny sighed.

‘If you know that much about me, then you’ll know that a dot, dot, dot, terrorist is the last thing I ever was. On account of ending up on the winning side, don’t you know. I’m an academic, a xenoarchaeologist. I’ve written hundreds of books about it. Well, three books, at least. I think I’ve got a copy of one somewhere...’

She made to rummage in the flight bag which she, alone of all the

passengers, had insisted on taking with her on the PanGLOSS. It contained nothing less innocuous than the emergency soap-wipes, travel sweets and the aforementioned copy of *Down Among the Dead Men*, for those sudden recreational emergencies where one completely forgets who one is – so it was something of a surprise when the security-man shot out his hand and gripped her arm as if she were about to produce a live grenade.

‘A writer, eh?’ he sneered, the last vestige of affability falling away like dandruff on a three-strand baldy who finally owns up. ‘Have you filled out your Twenty-seven B Stroke Six?’

‘My what?’ said Benny. The name seemed vaguely familiar, but she could not quite work out from where.

‘Twenty-seven B Stroke Six,’ the security man produced a ream-thick sheaf of papers from his jacket, where he must have been stowing them as a kind of body-armour, and flung them at her chest, hard enough to hurt. ‘Visa Declaration for Journalists of a Foreign Power.’

Benny looked down at the sheaf of papers, which she had caught before it could fall to the floor. On the title-page was stencilled Twenty-seven B Stroke Six, actually written out.

‘I’m not a journalist of any kind,’ she said, crossing her mental fingers over the technicality that she did indeed keep a journal.

‘Yeah, well all you writers say that,’ said the security-man, managing to convey that in his personal lexicon, writer was synonymous with utter scum, ‘and then you go back home and spread your filthy lies...’

‘Are you all right?’ said Jason. ‘Is everything okay?’

Benny turned with relief, even though there was nothing Jason could do and then her heart sank as she realised that there was definitely nothing Jason could do.

He was flanked by a pair of security-men who, quite obviously, hadn’t even bothered to be affable from the start. Black suits, black sunglasses and lengths of spiral-flex that suggested each of them had jammed a telephone receiver into his left ear.

Each bore the kind of grim impassivity that spoke of instant mayhem should the world move in a direction that they didn’t like, in a manner similar to calling down the Wrath of God.

What could Jason have possibly done, this soon, to be arrested by a pair like this? With a sick feeling, Benny contemplated a future suddenly containing latex gloves, rubber hoses and psychotic civilian auxiliaries, under Secret Service orders, mucking about in the internment camps.

The security man beside her, however, seemed to have another reaction entirely. His face split open in a wide, and apparently

genuine, beam of delight.

‘Mr Kane!’ he declared. ‘I recognise you from the... well, you’ll know about that better than I. I’d heard you might be arriving today. Pleasure to meet you, sir!’

‘Yeah, well,’ said Jason. ‘We have to take our pleasure where we find it, sometimes.’

He appeared to have undergone one of his abrupt changers of manner, Benny thought. He wasn’t just some tourist being arrogant with some local Nabob – he was some actual Dignitary dealing with a direct inferior.

Jason turned his somewhat patronising attention to Exhibit Benny. ‘And this is...?’

‘Just a small irregularity concerning the correct documentation, sir,’ said the security-man, consigning Benny to the status of an *inconvenience* rather than anything remotely human. ‘We’ll be dealing with it momentarily, never fear.’

‘She’s with me,’ said Jason.

‘Oh!’ Once again, the security-man’s attitude changed completely – into something far less assured and far more mortified. It was as though they had all stepped smartly to the left, leaving the security-man now standing on the trapdoor over the shark tank.

‘Certainly, sir,’ he said. ‘I quite understand. One can indeed fall into all manner of company on one’s travels.’

‘Are you attempting to give me a nudge and a wink?’ said Jason, coldly. ‘Certainly not, sir!’

‘Go away now, please. I have matters of some... import to consider.’

The security-man sidled away with the air of one gratefully escaping with his job – or even, possibly, with his life. Jason regarded him sidelong for a moment, then turned back to Benny and grinned. There was no sense of transition; he was just the Jason she knew again.

‘Sorry about that,’ he said. ‘I gather that things are somewhat fraught all over, what with the galactic situation at the moment. Zardox is getting a bit hysterical about proving to tourists that they can come here and be safe.’

‘Yes,’ said Benny, ‘but –’

‘This is Delbert,’ Jason said, gesturing to one of the black-suited men, ‘and this is Tarquentine. They’ll be coming with us, follow us around and stuff. Don’t expect much scintillating conversation – and if one of ’em decides to throw himself in front of a bullet, try to stay out of his way and let the man do his job.’

Benny was astounded. ‘We have bodyguards?’

‘Armed bodyguards, yes.’ Jason shrugged. ‘Look, it’s something I can tell you all about – but can we do it later? For the moment, I just want to get out of the Arrivals lounge.’

With Delbert and Tarquentine the bodyguards bracketing them, Benny and Jason walked out from the Arrivals lounge – and into the roar of a mob.

They were hammering against hastily erected crowd-control barricades. They were shrieking and screaming and, in some cases, fainting under the frantic and suffocating press of bodies.

They were predominantly, it seemed, adolescent girls between the ages of fourteen and sixteen. Several of them were waving things as they screamed, the least morally suspect of them being a collection of home-made placards. Benny caught sight of one which read:

JaSon!!!

Give me

youre babys!!

... and there were several more offering a similar sentiment, without the general sense of decorum and attention to grammar.

If Bernice Summerfield had been astounded before, she was now positively goggle-eyed.

‘Jason,’ she said. ‘Just what the bloody hell is going on?’

‘I think,’ said Jason, looking a little shamefaced, ‘this is going to have to be another one of the things I tell you about when we talk.’

Three

Humans as a species might have spread through several galactic spiral arms, founding colony-worlds as they go, but most humans, as individuals, never really leave home. In many cases, even if they happen to live in a city with a population in the millions, they never even leave their neighbourhood.

For these provincial people, whichever the province in which they actually live, the outside world has become unimaginably vaster than when human beings were planetbound on Earth – ‘far away’ has become much, much farther, and far stranger.

These doughty bucolics tend to get their news about the greater galaxy at large from what are known, collectively, as *Les Aventures de la Frontière Nouvelle*. Whether hawked around as data-wafers, fabricated from local materials as books or dramatised and downloaded from GalNet, these works are notable for being based on the lives of actual people – and in that the lives of these people have been twisted outrageously for the sake of pure sensation.

Bernice Summerfield, for example, in the minds of a large proportion of the galaxy, was a time-travelling adventurer and sometime assassin for hire, travelling with her dim-witted minion, Jason, who was noted for his savant-like expertise in throwing wicked little flick-knives.

The fact that wicked little flick-knives are physically impossible to throw with anything approaching accuracy, no matter what the level of expertise with which one throws them, is neither here nor there.

‘I mean, all right,’ Jason said. ‘There are those where I’m just the sidekick but there’s some where I’m like this well-connected criminal who gets in sticky situations and ends up saving everybody and his dog because, underneath it all, I’m just this really terrific and totally noble guy. Not that any suggestion that I’m any kind of criminal is anything other than total toss, of course.’

‘Of course,’ said Benny.

They were in their big and almost impossibly elegant suite in the Starsail the hotel to which Delbert and Tarquentine the bodyguards had podded them, evading the frantic pursuit of any number of barely post-pubescent girls.

Delbert and Tarquentine were outside the suite now, no doubt on watch for anyone particularly determined, who might attempt to sneak in and rummage through the contents of Jason’s drawers.

‘Anyhow,’ said Jason. ‘Some while back, I was here on Zardox as a consultant – one of the casino-chains wanted to branch out into a

certain area of the, uh, adult demographic, and I had the sort of idea-mix they wanted, know what I mean ...?’

‘I know what you mean,’ Benny said. Jason, she knew, had a more than somewhat lucrative sideline in what he had once described as ‘totally irredeemable interspecies porn and proud of it’.

Strangely enough, a large factor in that success was that he produced it to an idiosyncratic but marked set of moral codes. This might, at first sight, have seemed to be the kiss of death for irredeemable interspecies porn – but it had carved out a niche for itself among a surprising number of people who didn’t find it offensive because of just those moral codes. Benny could imagine how a certain sort of person, looking for a certain kind of holiday thrill, might go for it like a shot. They’d probably use words like ‘action’ and ‘spicy’ while looking for it, too.

Benny couldn’t remember Jason ever having mentioned being on Zardox before, but he had spent a lot of time out of her immediate sphere of reference over the years (including several years trapped in a Demon Dimension) on mysterious errands of his own. It was entirely possible, as with any number of things, that the subject simply hadn’t come up.

‘I was hung up here for a while, sorting out some logistical problems involving a gimbal-harness and a baby trampoline, and I ended up getting involved with a – surprise, surprise – sticky situation. It’s not worth going into, really. It didn’t mean anything in the greater scheme of things – except I came out looking like a bit of a hero. The *Frontière Nouvelle* stories about me went through the geodesic and I became something of a celebrity. Thanks of a grateful populace, keycards to the sauna-complex, the whole bit.’

‘Now, hang on,’ Benny said. ‘The number of rich and famous people on Zardox, that would be news. I’d have heard about something like that.’

‘No you wouldn’t. Zardox comes it like the new New Las Vegas, but it’s really more like a glorified Bognor...’

‘Bognor?’ asked Benny, who had never heard of the place.

Jason shuddered slightly. ‘Don’t ask. New Las Vegas and so on are like tourist-processing plants. Grind the suckers up, extract the cash and spit them out as sludge. Zardox is more like a farm. The tourists are like a cash-crop, or like sheep, and they need to be nurtured. Kept in ignorance of what’s going on behind the scenes. The real community is all the croupiers and bar-staff and their families and so on. They wouldn’t want news of a... sticky situation to get out, It would be bad for return business.’

Benny wandered over to the refrigerated minibar and opened it.

These days, she was well aware, the stocking of such appliances was

a refined science. Instead of a standard inventory of little bottles and little packets of nuts and suchlike, the depredations of which appeared on your bill, minibars were stocked in advance depending on your credit-rating. Benny had found herself on the wrong end of this arrangement in her time, opening the door to gaze forlornly on a can of generically branded fizzy drink and an individually packaged cheese string.

The door of this bar opened on a wide selection of vintage champagne magnums, big bottles of cognac and a huge glazed ham. It was a wonder that they had managed to close the door after stocking it.

‘Do you know, Jason,’ Benny said. ‘I think that I might learn to live with the fact that you’re a bit of a local celebrity.’

It was at that point that the door of the suite burst open, and a somewhat crazed-looking figure hurtled through it.

‘Jason dahling!’ it shrieked, contriving in the face of every sonic possibility to render the long ‘aah’ in darling fit to shatter plate glass. ‘Have you been hiding from me, you naughty boy? You know I told you to call me the very second you were in!’

After she had recovered somewhat from the shock, Benny looked the apparition over. The woman was of what the kind might call a ‘certain’ age and what the unkind would point out as decidedly uncertain.

Years of cosmetic surgery had taken their toll, the coin of exchange being in the remaining scrap of viable skin stretched over the skull to give an immobile, bug-eyed expression of permanent surprise. There was a strong sense that, should a couple of sutures fail above the hairline, her entire face might fall off.

Not exactly helping was the fact that the woman, as some women of a certain age do, had retained the cosmetic-style that had been popular in her first flush of youth. It was particularly unfortunate that, in this case, the style was one of white slap and garish, vivid primaries. The end result was suggestive of someone that the Batman should be chasing for their dastardly yet rib-tickling crimes.

A blended purple and bleach-blond wig sat on her head like a briny-gonk on a van de Graaff generator. And the least said about the fluorescent orange twin-set and black-eyed pearls the better for all concerned.

If Jason, for his part, was in any way fazed by this apparition he gave no sign.

‘Hallo, Lolita,’ he said. ‘I was going to call you first thing, but things got a little hectic. Can you forgive me?’

Lolita sucked her lower lip in a vaguely overplayed *moue* of

consideration, then beamed widely with apparently genuine delight. It was probably Benny's imagination that she heard artificially implanted tendons creaking under the strain.

'But of *course* I forgive you!' she cried, Lolita, that was, as opposed to Benny – who for her part was starting to have some inkling that Jason might indeed require forgiveness in the very near future. 'Nothing my best Big Boy could do would ever have me weeping in inconsolable misery or even thinking of putting a contract out on his life! Kissy-kiss.'

Lolita presented her face for the aforementioned kissy-kiss, and Jason made a little show of pecking the air on either side of her face.

'This is Lolita de Salamo,' he said to Benny. 'Executive Producer from MegaStel Productions. I said that they could, uh, do a little piece on us while we were here, what with me being a bit of a celebrity and all.'

'Oh yes?' said Benny, as a number of things suddenly became slightly more clear. 'And let me guess how that works. The extortionate fee we're going to be getting for it is offsetting the extortionate cost of our stay? Something like that?'

'Essentially, yeah,' said Jason, looking a little shamefaced. 'To some extent.'

Benny had something to say about that, and was about to say so in no uncertain terms, when Lolita de Salamo turned to peer at her sharply, as though noticing her for the first time.

'And you must be the wife we've all heard so much about!' she cried, as if announcing the discovery of an entirely new and extraordinary form of life. Nobody, it seemed, had ever done something so odd and surprising as getting married before.

'Ex-wife,' Benny said. 'It's all a bit complicated.'

'The trouble and strife,' Lolita continued to herself, as though trying on the concept for size. 'The old ball and chain...'

It was unclear whether she was attempting to be charmingly trenchant and failing, or trying for bad-tempered spite and succeeding all too well.

'You're such a pretty little thing, aren't you?' she continued. 'I, ah, don't suppose you'd be amenable to keeping your liaison with Jason under wraps? It would help us with our target demographic if we gave the impression of him being free and single...'

Jason would have had to have been far slower on the uptake than he was not to have caught the expression on Benny's face.

'Not going to happen,' he said hurriedly. 'Benny and I are an item right up until the point where she says otherwise. This is a package-deal, and that isn't open for negotiation. Like the way you don't get us on the toilet, or rolling around in bed and doing it and stuff. You take

us both or you get neither.'

For a moment Lolita de Salamo stood stock-still, like an android encountering some problem that demanded all the runtime in its cybernetic brain. Then she powered up again, and turned all the sense of genuine delight she had evidenced toward Jason on Benny.

'Well, I'm *sure* we can accommodate you into our plans,' she said, fingering Benny's hair with a withered, clawlike hand, 'You must tell me, dear, is this original? Well I'm certain we can do something about it...'

Four

Even in these enlightened days, when absolutely no one makes snap and hurtful judgements based upon an individual's species, race, sex, religion or interpersonal proclivities, the term 'male stylist' calls to mind two distinct and stereotypical possibilities.

Benny got the second one.

The salon was of a neominimalist and somewhat brutalist design, rusty partitioning-sheets of steel plate arranged seemingly at random, and rejoiced in the name of name of Monsieur Hooty. Apparently, if one was to believe the overenthusiastic and frankly envious exhortations of the fetching young receptionist, Benny was going to receive the personal attentions of the galaxy-famous Carlo Hooty himself!

Sitting in the waiting area, sipping her complementary beverage and glancing around at a number of ladies every bit as hideously cosmeticised as Lolita de Salamo had been, Benny wondered how she had managed to get herself into this situation.

At some point things had turned themselves around, so that doing a media piece with Jason was somehow a victory – as opposed to a horrible imposition that she should have been consulted about – and from then on she had been hustled along without being given time to think...

Piles of new clothes had arrived for her, back at the hotel, in MegaStelbranded steamer trunks. Though being perfectly tailored to her size and of the finest construction, the outfits had put Benny in mind of Widow Twanky without the restraint.

Looking at this coruscatory† pile, Benny had become aware of something she had never felt before. Ordinarily, in her life, she didn't care much what she wore so long as it preserved some degree of modesty and kept the rain off. Now, for the first time in her life, she realised that there were clothes she wouldn't be seen dead in, and had said so.

† It is a sad fact that those who believe in received wisdom, as opposed to thinking for themselves, will just assume that any particular author can be reduced to a handful of easily identified catchwords or literary devices. We are therefore fortunate that our current author has sworn, on a stack of Bibles, that he will absolutely not do anything of the sort this time.

Instantly, the door of the suite had opened, and liveried Starsail porters had brought in new trunks to replace the old. These had contained creations of a simpler, more elegant cut, and of such beauty that Benny could have wept or at least, in ordinary life, could have wept over the fact that she could never have afforded them.

This had been her first inkling, however, that she and Jason were under some system of active surveillance. Maybe there were cameras in the walls, or possibly it was by way of nanonetic microcams, no more detectable by the naked eye than molecules of the air in which they floated under conductive guidance. A simple security measure? Or was Lolita de Salamo already gathering material for her show?

Either way, she and Jason were being watched.

On that general subject, Lolita de Salamo had positively insisted that Benny should not be seen in public with her current hair. Something simply must be done with it – despite all Benny’s protests that it hadn’t yet grown out sufficiently to do anything with it at all.

Tarquentine the bodyguard had then promptly whisked her off, in such a smooth and easy manner that it was only later she wondered if, had she refused to go, he would have resorted to actual force.

Now, in the neobrutalist surroundings of Monsieur Hooty and in a tastefully sexy little number in crushed velvet that was, now she came to think of it, completely the wrong thing to wear for a haircut, Benny glanced around herself for any sign of hidden surveillance.

It was probably fruitless – largely on account of the meaning of the word ‘hidden’. She thought she had caught a slight shimmer in the air that would indicate the presence of a microcam swarm, but that had merely turned out to be the heat-haze over the waxer.

Briefly, out of pure contrariness, Benny considered spending her time swearing and making obscene gestures, thus rendering any footage that might be gathered of her unusable. In the end, though, she decided that it wasn’t worth the effort. Besides, they’d probably use it, and she’d never live it down. The only thing she could really do was be herself, and try not to care that people were watching her be it.

‘Mother of God!’ came a bellow off to one side. ‘What have they done to you, pretty one?’

A muscle-bound figure burst into view, the bulk of his torso tapering in an almost perfect V-line which spoke of hidden corsetry – though the creaking could have come from his leather pants, down which appeared to have been stuffed sufficient hosepipe to deal with a small forest fire.

The frilly shirt hung open, just above the corset line, to reveal an explosion of dark and curly chest hair overlaid with a full kilogram of gold, on a chain, in the form of blocky letters spelling **HOOTY**.

And the hair on his chest, of course, was nothing to the hair sprouting from his head. Thick and lush it was, tied back with ribbons and never cut in its mature life – for who could even dare to cut the crowning glory of the most renowned, and not to mention high-priced, tonsorial artiste in the galaxy?

‘Er...’ Benny began, but she was cut short.

‘Ah, my little pastry!’ Carlo Hooty cried, fingering the nap of Benny’s head with brusque, but sure and strangely comforting fingers. ‘What insufferable cruelty you must have suffered in your life! I can feel the pain in every strand, in every follicle!’ His tone was that of a strong man trying, manfully, not to weep at the cruel and loathsome rigours of a wicked, wicked world.

‘I was, um, thinking...’ Benny tried to say, in a voice that sounded even to her small and thin in the face of the boom of Carlo Hooty, ‘A little bit off the back? Something from the sides ..?’

‘But no!’ Carlo Hooty now stood heroically athwart, a pontifical finger in the air. ‘This shall not stand! Your hideous ravishments must prepare themselves, my woman of the hideous and most unattractive ravishments, for *el Fandango de la Muerte!*’

Back at the Starsail suite, Jason lay relaxed on a massage table while a pair of heartbreakingly beautiful and whipcord-lithe young things – one boy, one girl – worked him over. He had, with thanks, though not without a tang of genuine regret, refused the offer of a happy ending with one, the other, or both.

It was just his good fortune, he supposed, that Lolita’s demographics wanted to keep him more or less the way he usually looked. That meant he could just kick back (though not literally at the moment, given the positioning of one of the lithe young things, since it would almost certainly have given him, or her, the entirely wrong idea) and enjoy himself.

‘Mff. Mffmmmm mmfmff,’ he said, into the massage table, as several knots of tension he had never been aware of in his life melted away.

‘I beg your pardon, dahling?’ Lolita enquired, from where she was sitting on the couch and flipping through a magazine-sized data wafer of the sort which, back in Jason’s early days, would probably have been called *The Face*.

Jason liked having Lolita around, in an odd kind of way. Age and cumulative surgery had taken away her human context. There was absolutely no kind of sexual chemistry there whatsoever, rather in the same way that human dreams of ‘sexbots’ and the like had never come to anything – the first truly self-aware experiments in that field had woken up, looked at humans and gone, ‘No thanks, I don’t fancy it very much.’ It was just a dead circuit.

Of course, the sort of human that a self-aware sexbot was likely to see, on first waking up, might have had something to do with it.

In much the same way, sharing a space with Lolita de Salamo was a bit like sharing it with some incidentally humaniform piece of modern sculpture: not beautiful to look at by any means, but interesting.

‘I just hope Benny’s getting on okay,’ he repeated more distinctly. ‘I’m a bit concerned about her, to be honest. She doesn’t usually let herself be railroaded into things like this without catching on.’

As he said it, Jason realised something of the truth of it. For a while now, since they had got back together, he had fallen into the habit of simply not bothering about things, and whether they were the right or wrong things to do. Consequences, he had felt, could simply go hang for a bit.

Part of that, of course, was about being so full of joy that he felt he might burst – but a large part of it lay in coming to rely on Benny’s reactions to keep him in check if he went too far.

If Benny’s judgement was going wrong at the moment, for whatever reason, then he was going to have to start thinking for them both.

‘Benny’s had a hard time of it recently,’ he said. ‘I just wouldn’t want anything to upset her.’

‘I shouldn’t worry about that, sweetie,’ Lolita said. ‘Monsieur Hooty is under *express* instructions to take the finest care of her. We’ve decided that she has the perfect identification-factor for the Professional Female demographic. People of my age.’

‘Your age?’ said Jason, startled. What with one thing and another including stasis, imposed rejuve-treatments and even the occasional time loop – Benny’s age was indeterminate at best. Rather like Jason’s, if it came to that. There was absolutely no way, though, that anyone could possibly confuse it with that of Lolita.

Unless, of course, that person was completely and utterly deluded.

‘Lolita...’ Jason began, trying for tact and hoping to all the various gods that he wasn’t coming off like a caregiver trying to persuade a senile charge to take their meds. ‘How, uh, old are you, if that isn’t an indelicate question?’

‘Of course it’s not an indelicate question, silly,’ said Lolita. ‘I’m thirty-two and proud of it.’

‘You, um, don’t look it,’ said Jason.

‘Why, thank you dahling!’ Lolita seemed to be delighted. ‘One does one’s best. The *genuine* handcrafted plastic surgery and polypropylenes don’t come *cheap* of course, but then that’s the point, isn’t it? Nobody would believe the *hideous* amounts of money spent on it if they couldn’t *see* every *nip* and *tuck* of it, yes? And then there’s all the elocution lessons so that *every* other *word* comes out *emphasised* as though it should be in *italics*...’

‘Oops,’ said Jason, to himself, as certain things became more, and rather more horribly, clear.

Then, to Lolita: ‘So, all this stuff is like a... status symbol? Looking like that is, like, the height of Zardox fashion?’

‘But of course, dahling! All the girls are doing it. All the Post-thirty

Group A Professional Females worth the classification, anyway.'

Lolita became conspiratorial. 'Mind you, *some* of them simply *refuse* to undergo procedures that are irreversible without a complete facial regen-andrebuild – the cowards. Not to worry, though. I'm certain your Ms Summerfield won't have to put up with any second-rate shoddiness like that...'

In the neobrutalist surroundings of Monsieur Hooty, Monsieur Hooty himself was throwing what might be termed as a small strop.

'And for what should I be wanting a small strop?' he bellowed. 'Is the great Carlo Hooty going to be shaving this very vision of luminescence as though removing the five o'clock shadow from a ladyboy? I think not! Take it away from me, worthless peon! Take it away this very instant!'

A trembling assistant picked up the compact leather strop from where it had fallen and bore it away. Carlo Hooty tut-tutted at a world containing such things as unnecessary strops and turned back to the little steel table, on which were arranged a collection of instruments that reminded Benny, a little disquietingly, of torture-implements.

'And now, my little fish of sumptuous delight,' he announced, advancing on Benny with a painful-looking crimper, 'we shall begin. And we must also, but of course, do a little something to accentuate the face...'

Jason pelted from the lobby of the Starsail – Delbert the bodyguard positively straining to keep on his heels – into the famous Plaza of the Nine Dials, off which the hotel was situated. Had he been less preoccupied, he might have taken a moment to appreciate the sun-drenched, pristine majesty of its clock-towers and carillons, but he had far more important things on his mind.

There are times in life when one apprehends an instant of – not exactly self-awareness, but rather one of world-awareness. That famous Naked Lunch moment, where you see just what's on the end of every fork and precisely what it means. You can be toddling along quite happily through life, going about your business – and be suddenly struck by the profound realisation of how ridiculous you look to others. Such intimations commonly have people vowing to grow up, start acting their age and give up the drink. At least for a bit.

For Jason, in this case, the realisation had been centred on Benny.

She had gone through a lot, these last months. The privations of life during wartime, when the Braxiatel Collection had been invaded by Axis troops at the behest of... creatures she had every reason to hate above all else in the known universe. The thought that she had lost her son, and the strain of keeping that son safe after learning of his survival.

The physical and moral degradations she had suffered, in a time where every choice meant betrayal of one form or another, when mere survival meant the sacrifice of principles and other lives. All of this had wounded her, come close to destroying her, in ways that she herself was only now coming to recognise.

And then there was the fact that, before that, she'd had her head shaved in fairly unpleasant circumstances. She still had nightmares about that, Jason recalled. He didn't quite know the details, but even he could realise that Benny needed her hair messed around with like she needed a hole in the head.

Now, Jason realised, the fact of somebody messing around with her barely-regrown hair – and turning it into the kind of monstrosity sported by Lolita de Salamo – would hurt her deeply in ways he had never even considered. It was just the sort of thing that might tip her over the edge.

Of course, the fact that it might just simply make her livid, have her blowing her top and making the life of one Jason Peter Kane a misery for weeks was neither here nor there. The only important thing was to find Benny before it was too late. Only...

Only, now he came to think about it, that might be slightly harder than he had thought.

When he had received that moment of blinding clarity, he had snatched up his trousers and run from the Starsail suite with no other thought in his head than to save Bernice Summerfield from the stylistic clutches of Monsieur Hooty. Now, out in the Plaza of the Nine Dials, it occurred to Jason that it might have been an idea to first enquire as to where this *Monsieur* Hooty actually was.

* * * *

The device of using four little asterisks, as above, is these days commonly used to alert the reader to the fact that a section-break in any text has fallen at the bottom of one page or at the top of the next. Presumably in response to the number of people going: 'But why, oh why, does the action on the next section start in a different place, with a different person and without an indent at the start of the paragraph? I simply cannot understand why this is so, for I am a congenitally subliterate cretin with the general reading-sensibilities of a plank!'

Those of this ilk will then, like as not, promptly take themselves away to their computer keyboards, there to express the opinion that the writer, editor and publisher of the text in question all suck. While contriving to spell the word 'suck' wrong.

Conversely, the readers of this small volume are, without exception, kings and queens amongst men – or women, or whomsoever they might wish to be kings and queens among. Such innately sensitive and perspicacious people walk in truth and beauty all their days, and truly

are a joy to behold.

We love you, frankly. So much so, in fact, that if you send a stamped addressed envelope care of this publisher, the current author promises to send you a small piece of chocolate. †

† Offer only applies to any date and time the author happens to have any spare chocolate, and feels like giving a small piece of it away.

Chocolate notwithstanding, such fine people certainly deserve an explanation as to why four asterisks have fallen in the middle of a page.

Thus:

In the old days, any old days, the device was used to indicate where a passage containing events of a particularly mucky kind had been cut in the interests of censorship. Or to indicate that this would be where the mucky stuff was going on, had the author been able to plumb sufficient depths of depravity to even write it.

Thus, in the old days, the bits coming up with Benny and the Lounge Lizard – to say nothing of Jason and the five-piece girl band – would have been covered by four little asterisks as opposed to being explicated in all their graphic and hugely gratuitous glory. And not to even mention all the rolling around in bed and doing it and stuff that's going to come towards the end.

These days, however, in these more permissive times, the device has simply come to mean that a section of narrative-time has been, rather than merely contracted, summarily cut. Events within the story qua phenomenon demand a resolution, nothing would be added by detailing the minutiae of the hours and minutes leading to that resolution, so the best thing is to jump directly to that resolution without beating around the bush in any way, shape or form.

Pointing out, for example, that the nefarious plans and intentions of a shadowy and mysterious villain were even now proceeding apace, and that their tendrils of influence would quite soon intersect the very lives of Benny and Jason, would be a needless distraction.

Likewise, detailing the various travails of Jason himself as he slunk back to the hotel, found that he had locked himself out of the suite and had to knock, asked Lolita de Salamo where the Monsieur Hooty establishment was situated, set off again, this time remembering to put his trousers actually on instead of merely grabbing them... all of this, as we say, likewise, would just be a pointless complication and so will simply not be mentioned.

In short – and, as we say, without any kind of pointless beating around the bush whatsoever – the most important thing to relate, without any further ado, is that, what with one thing and another, and for reasons outside of what he might be reasonably expected to

control, Jason burst through the doors of Monsieur Hooty somewhat later than he had hoped.

‘Do you have an appointment, sir?’ the rather fetching young receptionist began, automatically, in tones of slightly contemptuous disinterest – then performed an almost classic double-take as the light of worshipful recognition passed across her face.

‘Jason Kane! I’m your biggest fan! The way you came out of the catacombs with the Mactalan’s daughter over your shoulder, hacking at the squabmous tentacles of the Slithe with your machete...’

The girl began searching frantically for something with which Jason might sign his autograph. Jason got the impression that there was a distinct possibility as to what, precisely, he might be expected to sign his name on.

For all his faults, Jason Kane knew the correct and proper manner for dealing with a fan.

‘Bugger this you silly bint,’ he snapped. ‘I don’t have the time. Where’s Benny Summerfield?’

‘B-benny Summerfield...?’ the poor receptionist stammered, her face a picture of the shocked and sudden desolation one feels when meeting an Idol in person and an edifice of delusion comes instantly crashing down. ‘I, uh, I think she –’

‘Benny!’ Jason hammered on a rusted steel partition, bruising his hand a little on its intransigent weight. ‘Ow! Benny! Where are you?’

Monsieur Hooty being an establishment of the finest and most expensive kind, it of course had private security staff to prevent the slightest inconvenience to or harassment of its clients. A pair of these – in costumes giving them an aspect of comprising half of a barbers’ shop quartet – left the reception-area seats on which they had been sitting.

Jason became aware that Tarquentine the bodyguard had left his own seat, now, to join his comrade Delbert. Then a couple more security staff arrived from the back, assembling the full quartet. Things might have turned truly nasty at this point, had not a plaintive voice called ‘Jason!’ from behind a partition off to one side.

He found Benny staring at her face and hair on the mirror. There were tears in her eyes.

Jason looked at her dumbly, his own tears welling up in sympathy. ‘Oh dear God...’ he breathed.

‘It’s so... I never... I never knew I could look so beautiful...’ said Benny.

‘But of course,’ said Carlo Hooty, spinning his crimper and holstering it like a gunslinger. ‘How could I be the finest, and not to mention most expensive, artiste in the galaxy, if I did not give the lady

precisely what was best for her?’

Five

‘Now this is more like it.’ Jason clapped his hands and rubbed them together in what looked, for all the world, like genuine pleasure as he surveyed the bronzed bodies on the beach.

This was a little uncharacteristic of him, Benny thought. The sort of people who might be, charitably, called the Leisured Rich tended to leave him incandescent with barely suppressed rage most of the time – though certainly not speechless. Possibly it was just because, being tourists as opposed to Zardox residents, there was a singular lack of them chasing after him and throwing their knickers at him. It must have been a bit of a relief.

Of course, the other reason might have been that these people were old enough to look at without feeling you should be wearing a dirty raincoat. And as tourists, these people had a different and more universal idea than the current Zardox fashion of what looked good.

Whatever the cosmetic means used to achieve it, what looked good for these people was, basically, skin and lots of it. There was an intramural volleyball tournament going on nearby, for example, that would have the producers of a soft-core comedy about the wacky adventures of a dope-smoking beachside lilo salesman weep for joy.

Jason, for his part, had changed into something billowing and beachcomber-chic in raw silk. A huge amount of tailoring had gone into it; he looked rumpled and somewhat disreputable – but it was the sort of rumpled disreputability that could walk into the bar and tell Sam to play it again.

‘I think I’ll go for a bit of a walk,’ he said. ‘You know, have a look round. Take in the scenery.’

‘And we all know what you’re going to be looking at,’ said Benny from her sun lounger, in a sarong, rubbing cocoa butter into her arms. The little cap from the bottle was held between her teeth in a way that was too cute for words. Then she took the cap out of her mouth and repeated herself more distinctly.

‘Well, I must admit I’ve noticed one or two points of local interest,’ said Jason.

‘At the very least.’ Benny lay back and took a sip from a tall and frosty glass of 150-proof fruit salad which, apparently, went by the name of Expletive Deleted, and which had cost her MegaStel expense account the equivalent of half a day’s wage. Half a day’s wage for poor people who didn’t have a MegaStel expense account, obviously.

‘Just try not to get arrested, yes?’ she said.

Jason wandered off. Tarquentine the bodyguard, contriving in some

manner to remain unobtrusive while wearing a pair of shocking pink bikini briefs, wandered after him. Benny wondered, idly, where he was keeping his gun.

There had been a time, she thought, years ago, when the very hint of Jason going off to look at pretty people would have been the precursor to... if not a flaming row, then at least a few rather tart remarks and a certain individual spending the night on the sofa. That kind of childish jealousy had long since gone, replaced by the implicit trust of truly knowing someone, and knowing them for years, and knowing that whatever else they might do, they would never intentionally hurt you.

Benny preferred not to think about that too much, on the whole, on the basis that it would probably jinx it.

She rose a little to set her drink down on the table beside her and then lay back, a little surprised at how controlled and composed she felt. She'd felt something like this before occasionally, on some archaeological dig, brushing aggregated dust from some buried artefact or whatnot: totally focussed on a job she knew precisely how to do.

This was the first time she had felt so completely in command of her own body since... well, since the time she had been ousted from her body without so much as a by your leave and then jammed back into it.† For the first time in months – in years, even – she felt confident and complete in and of herself.

† See Professor Bernice Summerfield and the Squires Crystal, where Bernice Summerfield's mind was translocated into the body of a man and all sorts of humorous complications ensued.

This was due in large part to the attentions she had received from Carlo Hooty – and the strange thing about that was that, in the end, he hadn't done anything all that much. A few snips from the hair, a touch of semi-permanent pigment on the face... but the end result had been extraordinary.

It was like those occasional moments where you happen to catch a glimpse of your reflection, the light just happens to be right and you think 'who's that really gorgeous person?' – only now it was happening all the time.

And this was, of course, why Carlo Hooty made the big money. It was akin to the way in which some distinguished actor will receive a small fortune for delivering a single line – you're not paying for the two seconds of work, you're paying for the years of experience that go into doing it precisely right.

In any case, while enjoying her 'new' look, it occurred to Benny that it must be something of a disappointment to any hidden MegaStel

microcam that she was doing nothing more with it than lie around in a sarong and sip a drink. Hardly exciting footage – even for that portion of the audience who just liked looking at extremely good-looking ladies lying around, since this latter demographic would no doubt prefer the removal of the sarong.

Well, MegaStel and their viewers could go on being disappointed. Excitement and adventure could simply go hang for a while. She'd had a rough few years. It was the considered opinion of one Bernice Surprise Summerfield that she deserved a week of doing nothing more energetic and perilous than lazing around with something nice to drink. Punctuated by a bit of rolling around in bed and doing it and stuff, of course, when the mood was upon her.

Speaking of drink, the Expletive Deleted beside her now looked more than somewhat in need of freshening up. Benny stretched herself lazily under the gentle Zardox sun and considered what to do about it.

Delbert the bodyguard was lying close nearby on a beach towel, in a pair of retro Speedos and black shades which gave no indication of whether his eyes were open and scanning the surroundings or whether, as he seemed to be, he was asleep. This particular beach was of the exclusive sort that barred the intrusion of any kind of serving staff save whom the inhabitants might bring for themselves. Benny began to regret telling Delbert that he should not attempt to play the part of an attentive personal manservant, on this trip to the beach, on the grounds that it would totally creep her out.

Benny stretched again, then climbed from the lounge and picked up her empty drink. She headed for the nearest of the cabana bars that nestled discreetly, out of the way, amongst the palm fronds further inland.

Delbert the bodyguard, she idly noted, had equally discreetly left his towel and was wandering toward the same general location, where he would no doubt happen to arrive at just the same time to order a discreet sparkling water. After waiting for Benny to be served first, but of course.

This kind of unobtrusive but total protection, Benny thought, might rapidly begin to pall at some point. For the moment, though, under the Zardox sun, it was nice to just bask for a little while in the feeling that, here and now, nothing even remotely dangerous would be allowed to happen to her at all.

Jason trudged along the shore – though *trudged* was probably the wrong word. The Zardox sand was so fine and refined as to feel slithery under his bare soles rather than gritty.

'Jason slithered up the beach,' however, would have given the wrong impression entirely.

Various beautiful people cavorted appropriately on the sands, but Jason paid them no real heed. For all that he had given the impression to Benny that he was going off to snack on eye-candy, he had simply wanted to take some time out for himself and think things through. And if MegaStel got tired of him wandering along looking all wind-swept and alone then they could just stuff it.

Jason flipped a little V-sign to where he imagined a floating MegaStel microcam to be, on general principles. A healthy-looking blonde in a knitted tank-top and thong, thinking the gesture was directed at her, scowled and air-spat in a manner that left no doubt whatsoever of her contempt for rumpled-looking jobs who flipped V-signs at her.

‘Sorry,’ Jason mumbled, and hurried on.

Jason Kane was suddenly feeling, in short, out of sorts. Miserable, in fact – to the degree of having the love of your life leave you or your best girl die in your arms.

That wasn’t mere hyperbole; both of these things had happened, at one time or another in his life, and Jason knew precisely how they felt. This wasn’t the mood where you jump out at people waving a couple of empty bottles of Paracetamol and shouting ‘Look what I’ve done!’ This was the kind of slit-your-wrists wretchedness where you just want to go away somewhere quiet, and lock the door behind you, and switch it all off.

Well, he’d felt like this before in his time, and would no doubt feel like it again. The thing was, here and now, he couldn’t think of a single thing that might be making him feel like it.

For what seemed to be the first time in years, things seemed to be going well. The sense of love and trust in his life was simply back, like switching on a light inside, and he should be revelling in it, not feeling like this.

That was probably the problem, when you came right down to it, Jason thought. It was a bit like reaching the end of a marathon: all the pain and exhaustion you’ve been holding off for so long hits you like a hammer and you collapse. And then there was the fact that every time – every single bloody time – he had come close to feeling like this, some new calamity outside of his control would occur to snatch it away from him again.

It was like waiting for the other shoe to drop. The constant fear of some impending disaster – hence his recent overreaction at something so simple as Benny getting a sodding haircut. No wonder he was getting migraines...

Lost in self-reflexive – and not to mention, he supposed, self-pitying thought, Jason now realised that he had left the populated area of the beach and, rounding a bluff, entered an area that seemed entirely

deserted and unspoilt.

‘Unspoilt,’ he was vaguely aware, having spent some time on Zardox previously, was a relative term and covered a multitude of sins. This was merely an area of beach which had recently been cleaned-up of the detritus of tourists, redressed with force-grown palm fronds, new sand sprinkled and to which the tourist population had yet to be introduced.

Not entirely deserted, either – for at that moment, from behind a middle-distant dune came a shrill and heart-rending cry:

‘Help!’ came the cry. ‘Oh dear God help! Is there nobody who can help a poor and simple five-piece girl band in distress?’

Benny leant against the bar and happily scanned the bottles on display.

‘I think I could quite possibly assay another of those Expletive Deleted,’ she said. ‘Though, then again, the Spontaneously Enjoyable Knee Trembler no doubt has its attractions...’

The attentive reader, sitting there with a stop-watch and wondering how it takes a half-hour of Jason moaning about the unfairness of life and whatnot for Benny to get to the cabana bar, is invited to imagine that this is not the first such trip for Benny, which isn’t hard. Alternatively, they are cordially invited to bite us.

‘I think, in the end,’ Benny mused, ‘I could plump for a Cocktail with a Hugely Gratuitous and Plonkingly Overextended Joke for a Name. Just give me alcohol, and lots of it.’

The bartender – judging his customer – smoothly produced a glassful of the potable in question and set it on a napkin before her, without all the shaking things up and throwing the shakers around that was the ordinary precursor of such a thing. (Even the most complicated of cocktails, with fruit and umbrellas and in some alien-based cases even small dead animals, were these days produced in a microsecond flat by molecular fabricator, and would happily sit there waiting under the bar while all the extraneous shaking and twirling and whatnot was going on.)

‘Ahh.’ Benny took a healthy pull on her molecularly fabricated drink. ‘Very nice. I wonder how many I’ve actually had.’

It occurred to her, vaguely, that she should probably start thinking about going a little bit easier on the drink. She’d been really good, these last few months, barring the occasional lapse. Pity to spoil it just because the drink was free...

‘Might I interest you in another?’ said a pleasant-sounding voice from off to one side.

On the other hand, what the hell. She was on holiday.

Benny turned to look the speaker over. Maybe it was the

indeterminate amount of drink inside her by this point, or possibly she had just spent too long in the sun, but for a moment it seemed that his features flickered and reformed the barest instant before she focused on them...

And it was at this point that, for Benny, things went a little bit strange.

‘You appear to know your cocktails,’ said her new companion, in mellifluous tones that seemed to turn her insides to butter. ‘Might I suggest that we try an Unclean Act of Obscene and Irreducible Depravity that will Land the Participants in Gaol and Oblige the Authorities to have any Marsupial who Might Survive it Humanely Destroyed?’

Jason breasted the dunes to see, as advertised, five young ladies of distinct and differing complexions – black, white, yellow, brown, bright green – specific shades no doubt determined by some management consultancy or other to appeal to the broadest possible demographic.

Different costumes, again, appeared to have been selected for a mixed and broad appeal – albeit that there is little one can do when five extremely well-built girls are wearing the equivalent of one set of clothes between them; a method of dressing women that seems to be a common currency the universe over.

Such thoughts were entirely secondary, however. The thing that riveted his attention was the horde advancing on the girls in a slow but patently menacing manner. The figures were nondescript in black robes and cowls but one detail blazed out: the sigils scrawled upon the back of their robes as if illuminated in neon.

‘Oh, bloody hell,’ Jason said. ‘The Jumping Shoggoths. What are those wankers doing here?’

Any suggestion that Jason Kane might be involved with anything so much as approaching criminality was – as he would mention at every opportunity total toss. He was known, however, by those in a position to know such things and take note, to have a number of connections amongst what might be called, with charity, the less savoury inhabitants of the galactic spiral arm.

Among those must be counted the Plague Dog Band – mercenary privateers noted for their complete amorality and utter lack of fear of any power or force in any of the human or alien worlds. Whenever or wherever the Plague Dogs met an enemy, then that particular time and place was when that adversarial entity met his, her, its or their end.

That was the story, anyway, and a jolly useful story it was if you wanted some nominal backup in those places and times where you

were doing something that might be regarded, by those not in full possession of the facts, as a bit iffy. In reality, of course, the Plague Dogs just did business in the same way as everybody else, albeit in a manner and in areas that everybody else seemed to frown on, for some reason. A finer bunch of guys, in short, you could never hope to meet.

The Clan of the Elevated Star Goat – colloquially, the Jumping Shoggoths were another matter entirely. A bunch of jumped-up pricks who had been trying to muscle in on the Plague Dog sphere of operations for a number of years. But where the Plague Dogs had, at the very least, some rough-and-ready sense of justice, the Jumping Shoggoths were just psychos with the general moral sensibilities of yeast.

They had originally taken their name and general philosophy of life from the remnants of certain sensational, horrific and entirely fictional accounts of alien contact surviving from the early twentieth century. Since the philosophical content of these accounts was literally zero, they had rapidly devolved into pointless and clinically insane fanaticism.

Now they merely lived for rapine and slaughter – to the point where they didn't even bother with the looting anymore. There was, quite literally, not a single sentient life form left that they could sell their loot to – and who they would not vastly prefer to slaughter viciously and out of hand in any case.

If the Jumping Shoggoths needed provisions, they simply cannibalised the bodies of those they had viciously slaughtered. There was a rumour to the effect that the final turning point had been when they found a method for fermenting human and alien bloods into a variety of spirituous liquors. After that, they had no need of ever turning back toward sanity.

They were quite simply a disgrace to the good name of space-piracy, and the galaxy would breathe easier when the last of them was wiped out.

All of which passed through Jason's mind in an instant – before his reflexes took over. It was an inbuilt, wired-in thing, instilled in anyone who might have found themselves in combat with the Clan of the Elevated Star Goat, at some point in their lives, and survived. You see the Jumping Shoggoths, you just go in there and you give 'em a damn good kicking. Take them down on sight.

Then again, of course, as Jason had learned over the years – once you're in actual combat, your senses sharpen, your reflexes accelerate under adrenalin and your mind clarifies in the specialised sense of picking up on the highest levels of threat and countering them effectively.

In this heightened state of awareness – as he decked one Jumping Shoggoth with a wild roundhouse right, smacking a left jab into the face of another with slightly more precision and breaking his nose – it was now that Jason finally realised something was a little off...

If this really was some marauding force of the Jumping Shoggoths, come to land on Zardox from God alone knew where, then there was a decided lack of weapons, blood-encrusted battle armour or any basic fighting ability whatsoever...

In fact, now he came to think about it, the only things that these guys had in common with the Clan of the Elevated Star Goat, in any way, shape or form, were the sigils that they wore...

It therefore came as not entirely a surprise when two quite beefy roadies took him down from behind, and a somewhat irate voice yelled from off to one side:

‘Cut! Cut! What the hell is this jerk doing on a closed shoot?’

Benny had no clear memory of how she had come to be in the club. Vague images occurred of a cab ride from the beach, the world outside the cab spinning around in the way that decontextualized neon signs saying BAR and DANCING and KITTY-KAT KELLAR do in old black and white movies, when the young lovers are having a Night on the Town as a concomitant to their Whirlwind Romance. This might have seemed a little odd – it having been full daylight the last time she remembered clearly – but Benny didn’t care. She was in love.

She was just so in love.

The club itself was everything of which one might dream – if your dreams were drawn from those same old movies. There was a floor show. There was more Art Deco than you could shake a Tiffany lamp stand at. There was a big band.

There were cigarette girls (more for the sake of their perky little uniforms than anything else, since Zardox had summarily blanket-banned smoking in an enclosed public space, without the thought occurring that people don’t actually go into clubs and bars and the like for the sake of their health).

It was pure class letting its hair down, smearing on the rouge and having fun by being tacky.

Now if only, Benny thought, I could remember its name...

This was only one of the things that had gone completely out of her head. There was the nagging feeling that she had forgotten something – someone? – very important. What was its (or their) name, now...?

The man across the table popped a champagne cork and proffered her a perfect rose.

‘The beauty of this poor thing, alas, cannot compare to the vision that I see before me,’ he said.

‘Mm?’ Benny gazed deeply into the eyes of her companion. She couldn’t quite remember when she had first met him, at least not for the moment, but it was as if she’d known him all her life.

When she had met him, something had melted inside her. Nothing existed but the ache and the yearning to be with him, to look at him, to follow him to the ends of the world for the rest of her life... the rest of her life and quite possibly beyond.

Say something! a little-girl voice inside told her desperately. Tell him how you feel about him and – but oh God what if he doesn’t like me...?

‘Burple,’ Benny said in sudden lovestruck panic.

‘Your voice,’ said her companion, ‘is as the tinkling laughter of angels and I could listen to it all night. Shall we repair to somewhere more secluded, where we can... discuss things further?’

Oh yes!

Benny’s heart leapt as if it might burst from her chest and skitter across the table. Never had she felt this way before. Never so alive and full of joy. Certainly, never with... never had she felt so alive and full of joy.

An offered hand touched hers. She felt the spark.

Every instinct told her that this was the one.

This was the one for whom she had waited all her life.

Every instinct told that she had, at last, after all these years of never truly knowing it, won her way to Love.

So Benny went with her instincts.

‘So, uh, let me get this straight,’ said Jason. ‘You’re Loni, you’re Shawna, you’re Jinx, you’re Poodles and you’re Biz – and together you are the Glitta Bitches. And you’re all, um, totally fine with that?’

‘Oh yeah!’ said Shawna the Glitta Bitch, or possibly Loni. The one in the bikini-based babydoll outfit, anyway. She snuggled rather close to him in a cute and somewhat puppyish way that did wonders for his self esteem. ‘We’re reclaiming it for the grrlz. Yeah!’

‘I mean,’ said Jinx, or possibly Poodles – the one in the pert little sailor-moon top, anyway, ‘just because you’re glittery and shit doesn’t mean you can’t rough it around and mess it up and stuff. That’s what Damian says. I think.’ She frowned endearingly. ‘I might have got it wrong what with being a girly little poppet.’

‘Forget I asked,’ said Jason.

‘Hold it there, loves,’ said Damian Agrazoth. ‘Let the cameras get a good shot of the pose. That’s good, that’s fine, thanks very much for your time, Mr Kane.’

This last with the polite dismissal from a professional pressed for time that really meant: Would you now please say your goodbyes and

piss off.

Damian was, of course, the director who had previously cried cut. In fact, Jason gathered, he was slightly more than that – the manager, promoter, songwriter, musical director, chief musician and even (suitably treated) vocal talent for the collective creative effort calling themselves the Glitta Bitches. (Loni and Biz could, apparently, play the triangle and maracas respectively, but so badly that it had to be looped in post.) The girls themselves were supremely good at jumping around athletically, though, and shaking such booty as might reasonably be required to be shook.

The reasons for this general set-up, while obvious, were not quite as cynical and reprehensible as might first appear – as Jason had realised, on first seeing Damian and recognising him. Or at least, recognising his species.

Damian (a fine old family name) Agrazoth came from the Demon Dimensions, of a bloodline that had once been known, from certain Earthly encounters, as Satan-spawn. Just because one's ancestors have variously been known as the Adversary, Great Beast and Vicar of the Endless Screaming Night, however, should not preclude one from earning a living in any field one chooses – and Damian's talents had lain, from when he had first spewed from the very Maw of Hell†, in a profoundly musical direction.

† 79, Acacia Avenue, Tring.

He had the saturnine good looks, and sexual magnetism, of the sort of star who ends up hanging from a doorknob with a bag over his head and a tangerine up his colon. He had the instrumental skills of someone who could actually play a musical instrument. And he had the voice – you should pardon the expression – of an angel.

The problem was, due to his proud heritage, that any direct broadcast of his face or voice would have had half the audience projectile-vomiting, bleeding from their ears and eyes and ending up decapitated by various coincidences involving elevator cables or plate-glass falling off the back of a lorry – while the other half subsumed themselves to his Unholy Will and promptly killed their parents, their first-born, or both.

The solution had been, of course, to filter these unfortunate side effects through the collective girly sweetness of the Glitta Bitches – the result of a galaxy-wide search to find the sweetest and most girly girls in the known universe. Including the fabulous lost colony-planet of Girly Prime, where all the girls were sweet and girly and a large proportion of them were even poppets. This ended up with a product that some – predominantly seven-year-old girls and forty-seven-year-old men – found fascinating, and everybody else found so irritating

that they wanted to puke.

At least, this was how things had been explained after Tarquentine the bodyguard had hauled the roadies off from Jason, introductions had been made and it had emerged that Jason was a bit of a local celebrity. The girls were currently surrounded by a cloud of hi-definition microcams, in much the same way that somewhat lower-quality MegaStel cameras were following Jason.

The Glitta Bitches were, in fact, in the midst of shooting their first full-length holomovie feature which, as described to Jason, seemed to occupy some indeterminate point between *A Hard Day's Night* and *Help!* – ie generally just pointless larking around but with the barest semblance of a plot, with some shadowy and mysterious villain or other, tacked on in cutaway to give it shape. Jason's minor-celebrity status meant that the shots he had just ruined, by piling in from camera-left and thumping Shoggoth-costumed extras, could be salvaged by turning it into a cameo.

'I just hope the Clan of the Elevated Star Goat don't ever get to see it,' he had said. 'You know, if it happens to be playing on some screen in a ship they board and horribly slaughter everybody on. The last thing I want is the whole lot of them coming after me for real. Again.'

'Don't worry about it,' Damian had replied. 'We'll blur the sigils on the final composite. Or overlay them with Parental Advisory graphics. It'll look like we're trying to be ironic.'

So now they were winding down from the final pick-up, so far as Jason was concerned, where the girls had all given him a hug and a kiss and thanked him for helping beat off the minions of the mysterious villain that seemed intent on stopping the Glitta Bitches from just generally larking around and having a good time. And we shall also pause, in mid paragraph, as a mark of respect for the entire page of references to 'Jason's small part' and 'Jason beating off the bad guys' and the so forth that the author thought was incredibly funny at the time... and then thought better of and deleted. You really have no clue as to how lucky you are.

'You realise,' Jason said, as we return to the moment, 'that my small part is going to mean precisely zippo in any kind of general release? Other than here on Zardox, nobody knows or cares who the hell I am.'

'Oh, I know who you are!' said Poodles, or it might have been Shawna, brightly. 'You're the dumb sidekick to that famous space adventurer and sometime assassin, Berni Summerfield or something, and everybody hates you 'cos you're not good enough for her. My mum reads about you in the *Frontière Nouvelle* adventures.'

'Yes, well, thanks for that, Poodles,' said Jason. 'Or possibly Shawna. The one in the cute little fem-dom outfit, anyway.'

‘Seemed like a nice enough guy,’ said Shawna, as the other Glitta Bitches jumped up and down on the spot, waving goodbye to Jason Kane as he walked off down the dunes. ‘Do you think he bought it?’

‘Mm?’ Damian Agrazoth the demon-spawn considered the question. ‘I think so. I suppose so. In the end, though, it doesn’t matter if he bought it or not – just so long as he takes it to Professor Summerfield.’

‘I notice,’ said Jason to Tarquentine the bodyguard, as they headed back the way they had come, with only constant backward glances to various Glitta Bitches jumping up and down on the spot and waving goodbye, ‘that there was a distinct lack of you helping out when it looked like my life might be in mortal danger.’

Tarquentine the bodyguard shrugged impassively, conveying that as a professional he had senses finely tuned enough that he could tell, perfectly well, if his charge might be in any actual danger or not.

‘There is that, I suppose,’ said Jason. ‘I suppose catching sight of the damn insignia just pushed my buttons and stopped me thinking properly. Even so...’ he continued, thoughtfully, ‘I’ve been to parties where some twat thinks that wearing Earth Nazi insignia might be a bit of a laugh. I don’t lose my cool. I just think they’re a twat.’

Tarquentine the bodyguard’s silence gave absolutely no indication that he was courteously forbearing to comment on the question of people being twats or not. At least, Jason hoped that it didn’t.

The light was fading towards evening by the time that Jason made it back to where he had left Benny, so it was no surprise that that lounge he had left her on was unoccupied. Benny was no doubt up at one of the cabana bars and enjoying a small – or far more probably extremely large – evening drink. Nothing out of the ordinary at all.

It was therefore something of a shock to arrive at the cabana bar to find no Benny. Or rather, there being other bars around, to find a happily dozing Delbert the bodyguard at this one but no Benny.

‘What the hell? Delbert!’ Jason waved his hand in front of Delbert the bodyguard’s face, then grabbed his shoulders and shook him. It was like trying to shake a lump of granite. ‘Delbert! What the hell is going on?’ Jason slapped him, backhanded, in the face. ‘Ow! Fingers! That was like smacking a lump of granite!’

Delbert the bodyguard slept on, insensate, while in the mind of Jason Kane the world came crashing down.

He had worried himself sick, earlier, about what might happen to snatch love and happiness from his life this time – and now here it was. Bang on order.

There is no telling what Jason might have done next, had not the bartender (who had been discreetly muttering into a wireless comms receiver all through this period of sudden panic) now attracted his

attention with a light touch on the arm and offered the receiver to him.

Tor you, sir,' said the bartender. 'It's the Security Service.'

Six

The Zardox Security Service, as has been mentioned, was supremely well-funded as befits a security service mostly dealing with the ultra-rich. This extended from the matter of keeping ‘undesirables’ out in the first place, to the fact that no resource was spared in dealing with any incident after the *desirables* were actually in.

Thus, when a certain Professor Bernice Summerfield was extricated from an altercation in an establishment known as the Club d’Anonime, determined to be the innocent party in said altercation and to be physically uninjured, the whereabouts of Jason Kane were traced and this information relayed to him in a matter of minutes.

This saved a lot of ultimately pointless running around in a blind panic.

Jason Kane arrived back at the Starsail Hotel, by way of MegaStel-chartered limousine, just in time to see a slightly dishevelled – but still entirely fabulous-looking – Bernice Summerfield being handed out, solicitously, from a patrol-car by a uniformed Serviceman.

Leaving Tarquentine the bodyguard to deal with a now-ambulatory but still drowsy Delbert the bodyguard, he struggled through those Jason Fans who were still up past their bedtimes and picketing the hotel to meet her.

‘Are you all right?’ he said. ‘Do you want to talk about it?’

‘In a minute.’ Benny was fuming. ‘I have to do something first. I’ve worked it all out, and I’m not going to go through it all twice.’

She stormed through the hotel doors at such speed that they barely had time to spring apart. Jason shook off a prostrate Fan who was attempting to crawl up his trouser leg, and wandered somewhat uncertainly behind.

Inside, Benny stalked over to the reception desk. Jason hung back while she harangued a taken-aback receptionist, not quite catching what she said. He damn well made it his business not to. Earwiggling when Benny was in this kind of mood, as he knew to his cost, was a definite no-no.

Presently, the amplified voice of the receptionist rang softly around the lobby: ‘*Will Ms Lolita de Salamo please come to the main reception area. Will Ms Lolita de Salamo please come to –*’

‘Give me that!’ This last, the sharper tones of an irate Benny. The sounds of a microphone being forcibly grabbed. Then: ‘*Salamo! You come down here right this second, you bitch! I want a bloody word with you!*’

Benny stomped back to Jason and stood there, still fuming and silent,

in the way that a character in a novella might do when waiting for a scene to get to the point.

After what seemed, to Jason, like crawling minutes, but was in fact the bare seconds it might take to start a new paragraph, Lolita de Salamo appeared and bustled over. She seemed worried. It was as if she had been both awaiting and slightly dreading this moment, on a hair trigger, but had hoped it might come later rather than sooner.

‘Now, before you say anything, Bernice – may I call you Bernice...?’

‘You can call me Professor Summerfield,’ said Benny, coldly. ‘And I believe that I shall call you Mud.’

‘Professor, ah, Summerfield – if you’ll only allow me to say that –’

‘I’ll allow you to say one thing, at this point,’ Benny snarled. ‘And one thing only. What is the actual name of this show you’re doing on me and Jason?’

‘Well, you *see*, I...’

‘*Name!*’

Lolita de Salamo looked at her feet, her self-possession deserting her under the sheer force of Benny’s rage. ‘Celebrity Split.’

‘I can’t hear you!’

‘Celebrity Split, all right? Celebrity Split! We take a celebrity, and his or her partner – who is hopefully at least *some* kind of celebrity themselves – and we try to split them up! Okay?’

Lolita!’ Jason stared at Lolita de Salamo, aghast. ‘How... I mean, how could you, Lolita? You’re my friend and I trusted you and – oh, who am I trying to kid. I knew that. Course I knew that, right from the start.’

Benny regarded him scornfully. ‘Now, why am I not the slightest bit surprised to hear it?’

Jason grinned, a little uncertainly. ‘Well, yeah, you know. I thought it would be the ideal way to prove to ourselves how much we love each other...’

Benny snorted.

‘... and, you know, I thought we could have a bit of a laugh about all the stuff they threw at us to try and split us up. Stuff like five-piece girl bands in bikinis and so forth, purely for the sake of argument.’

Benny sighed. ‘Forget about five-piece girl bands in bikinis, Jason. I strongly doubt that even MegaStel would sink to something so asinine, and frankly diabolical, as trotting out a five-piece girl band in bikinis and think that they could get away with it. In fact, I believe that MegaStel were, and are, making a different kind of show entirely.’

‘What?’ Now it was Jason’s turn to seem genuinely puzzled. ‘What are you talking about, Benny?’

‘Give me strength!’ Bernice rapped on Jason’s head as if it would go thunk-thunk-thunk like a watermelon. ‘Think about it, Jason! This so-

called Celebrity Split isn't primarily for GalNet syndication – it's for internal consumption. It uses local celebrities, the sort of people that nobody else in the galaxy cares a tuppenny toss about...'

'Thanks a lot!' said Jason, indignantly.

'So how many crowds of adolescent girls have *ever* chased you down the 42 street waving their knickers in the air, anywhere other than here on Zardox?'

'Well, now you come to mention it...'

'Okay, all right, bad example – but think on this. See if you can't put it together from first principles. Zardox is a beach resort for the ultra-rich, yes?'

'With you so far,' Jason said.

'Everywhere you look there's beautiful people with not many clothes on.'

'Still with you...'

'So, then, you're an average Zardox citizen; a hotel pool-attendant for example. You've just come back from a hard day looking at beautiful people without many clothes on, the majority of whom have spent the day treating you like dirt to the point where you could quite happily throttle the lot of them.

'You sit down, put your feet up and switch on the holoscreen. What are you going to watch? Something harrowing and depressing about real and normal-looking people and their real-life suffering... or yet more good-looking people without many clothes on?'

Jason thought about it.

Benny sighed. 'Again, bad example. Imagine you were somebody other than you, Jason.'

'Well, okay,' said Jason. 'I think I see what you mean. I suppose.'

'All the clues are there,' said Benny. 'I mean, the young would still be interested in *sexiness* as such through simple hormones – ie all the mass hysteria and knicker-waving and whatnot. I suspect that the population as a whole, though, would get jaded about such things far more quickly than the norm.' She prodded Lolita de Salamo. 'See how the women go in for cosmetic-surgery uglification at such a relatively early age? They're not trying to stay smooth and fresh and bland and young. They're trying to look older and more interesting.'

Lolita de Salamo sniffed, quite sulkily, through a sculpted nostril.

'The upshot is,' Benny said, 'that the target-audience wouldn't be interested in some lightweight piece of lowest-common-denominator garbage where you take a couple of bimbos and throw other bimbos at them until they burst into tears and get a job on a daytime chat show. Who cares what happens to bimbos? No. What they want to see is the real and actual suffering of a proper relationship being systematically torn apart. People being put through genuine misery and hell.' She

looked sidelong at him. 'Have you been feeling a little odd, lately Jason? You know, mentally and emotionally?'

'Um.' The question had come out of left field, catching Jason momentarily unawares. 'What do you mean?'

'Mood swings. Fits of joy and depression and such that you can't put down to any real cause? Overreacting to things in ways you can't explain why you did?'

'Something like that might have happened,' Jason said, guardedly.

'I know it's been happening to me,' said Benny. 'Not just feeling lazy and complacent but really, really lazy and complacent. Not just wanting a bit of a drink but really, really – well, all right, that one would be tricky to tell. Something's doing that to us. My guess would be electromagnetics from those bloody microcams following us around. They're disrupting the electrical activity in our brains and putting us in a mild hypnagogic state. Accentuating our emotional responses and reactions to the point where they're positively operatic. Is that how it is, Lolita?'

Lolita de Salamo nodded sullenly.

'That's just the groundwork, obviously,' said Benny. 'The base state they're using to work from – and I suspect they've got teams of psychologists working on profiles and ways to manipulate us. The same sort of experts and expertise that the Axis used for brainwashing and interrogation during the Occupation. The problem is that these experts are used to working on Zardoxians. We don't quite fit their basic expectations in any number of ways... and so the first *overt* move they made went completely spectacularly wrong.'

Benny paused for a moment before, matter-of-factly, dropping the bombshell.

'While you were off goggling at beach babes,' she said, 'they tried to set a Lounge Lizard on me.'

'A *Lounge Lizard*?' Jason was aghast at the enormity of this. 'That's... oh God, that's *disgusting*!'

Even Lolita, who was the person, after all, who had done it, had the vestiges of decency to look shamefaced.

The quasi-reptilian inhabitants of the planet Prastabelan IV in the Dagoben Nebula, the creatures who have become generally known as Lounge Lizards, are among the most respected of all sentient species in the galaxy – provided that they absolutely demonstrate their restraint from using a freakish and particular power they have over human beings. And for the most part the inhabitants of Prastabelan IV are scrupulous in observing this.

But of course, there is always the occasional rotten apple.

Quite simply, by a combination of chameleonic shapeshifting

ability, pheromones and telepathy, a Lounge Lizard can, at will, cause a human – any human – to fall utterly and desperately and hopelessly in love with them to the point where they will do anything – absolutely anything – they say.

Discussion on the moral implications of that would take a volume far more weighty than this. If you imagine, however, what would really be going on if the adolescent fantasy of being able to pick up girls who don't like you came true, you'll get the gist of it... and realise why anyone who isn't a congenitally mental and moral defective grows out of fantasies like that.

Discussion might also be had on whether the fact that the condition was temporary made it better or worse, morally speaking. Suffice to say, though, that the act of knowingly setting a Lounge Lizard on someone would put one amongst the lowest of the low.

The above might go some way to explaining why Jason was now looking at Lolita de Salamo with flat repugnance, to the point where he was seriously wondering whether snapping her neck would leave the world a cleaner place, like squashing a particularly loathsome bug.

For her part, Lolita now seemed desperate to justify the act – whether to anybody else or to herself it was difficult to say:

'It really wasn't like that!' she exclaimed. 'We had the situation totally monitored and under control! The idea was that the Lounge Lizard would whisk Professor Summerfield away for an afternoon of whirlwind romance, and then we would manipulate Jason so that he would come upon them in a compromising position...'

'So what went wrong?' demanded Jason.

'Our psycho-strategists switched their attention back to you, to find you lending a hand to a five – uh, to find you in the middle of a situation that had nothing to do with us. There was simply no way that we could extricate you in time to have you come across Professor Summerfield and the Lounge Lizard at the right moment.'

'So what contingency plans did you have in place?' Jason demanded. 'You know, should your carefully constructed plans for manipulating the lives and minds of other people suddenly go completely tits up?'

Lolita flushed. 'There were... things we could have done, if only the Lounge Lizard hadn't taken Delbert the bodyguard out of the picture by *inveigling* him with its blandishments and telling him to go to sleep...'

'But in any case,' cut in Benny, 'contingency plans on the part of MegaStel didn't turn out to be necessary.'

Jason was surprised. 'How so?'

Benny looked at him darkly. 'I've had... experience with people who

make me go weak at the knees, and make me totally in love with them, and then use it so that they can act like a total tosser. So I went with my instincts. I just hauled off and *decked* the quasi-reptilian bastard.

‘It was at that point,’ continued Benny, as if she hadn’t just taken an incredibly long run-up for an extremely short slide, ‘that I began to piece together what MegaStel were doing to you and me. The hypnagogic effect of the microcams, the psychological manipulation, the plans to put our relationship through the wringer and so on...’

‘Ah, yes,’ said Jason. ‘The deductive reasoning from first principles you mentioned.’

‘Well, actually, I just kept kicking the Lounge Lizard in the head until it told me everything it knew. That saved a lot of time. And not that I couldn’t have worked it all out from first principles if I’d wanted to. Anyway. By this time the Security Service had arrived, of course – and from the moment they realised I was kicking in the head of a Lounge Lizard it was an open and shut case. And the rest you know.’

‘Bravo!’ Lolita de Salamo clapped her hands. Suddenly she seemed to have recovered every inch of her self-possession. ‘Bravo! That should certainly add an extra bit of interest, eh? How are we going to have to change our plans, the viewer must be wondering, if you know what we’re trying to do with you?’

‘What?’ said Benny.

‘Oh, you don’t think we’re going to give up just because you’re on to us?’ Lolita seemed genuinely surprised.

‘I have to admit that was the general idea,’ said Benny.

‘Oh, no, Professor! We have an *agreement*.’

‘I didn’t agree to any of this, you bitch!’ Benny snapped.

Lolita smirked. ‘You *agreed* to appear on our show – the fact that you didn’t bother to ask what kind of show it was is neither here nor there. The fact that your partner might have known and you didn’t is between Jason and yourself. The fact remains that you *expressly* went along with his informed decision to appear.’

‘That’s a lot of facts,’ said Jason, inconsequentially, and instantly regretted it as both women glared at him to shut the hell up.

‘Yes, well, now I’m walking off the set,’ said Benny. ‘What’s to stop me and Jason simply walking off and taking the very next PanGLOSS out of this damn place?’

‘I was *wondering* when you were going to ask that,’ said Lolita. ‘Delbert? Tarquentine?’

Benny became aware that Delbert and Tarquentine the bodyguards were now, quietly and discreetly, standing there and bracketing both herself and Jason. There was absolutely no change in their manner that she could see but she got the distinct impression that, rather than

being under their protection, she and Jason were as of this point in their custody.

‘You must understand,’ said Lolita de Salamo, ‘that Delbert and Tarquentine the bodyguards are there to protect you, but they’re protecting you in the interests of MegaStel. You shall simply not be permitted to go against those interests, you understand?’

‘I believe I get the picture.’ Benny became thoughtful.

‘Good. Now, my advice to you is that you just continue as you have been, and try to come to terms with the fact that, wherever you go, our microcams will be following. And that our machinations concerning you and Jason will be following along with them. There is simply no way you can get away from them.’

Benny stopped thinking. That is, she brought her thoughts to a satisfactory conclusion, as opposed to suddenly becoming as dumb as those who might have thought that this is what was meant.

‘That’s not necessarily so,’ she said.

‘I beg your pardon?’ said Lolita de Salamo.

‘You can beg all you like,’ said Benny, ‘but you’re not going to get it. I remember the agreement you had with Jason – and there were conditions to it. There are at least two circumstances where you’re forbidden to gather so much as a scrap of material or find yourself in breach of contract. And I’m certainly not going to spend the next week on the toilet...’

She reached out and took Jason by the hand. ‘Come on, Jason, we’re going up into our room to have a lot of sex.’

Jason thought about it for a moment, then shrugged. ‘It’s a dirty job, but someone has to do it.’

Seven

In a Starsail corridor, Lolita de Salamo stood glaring at a firmly locked door and fretting peevishly into her personal phone.

‘Yes!’ she snapped. ‘Yes. Yes, that’s what I mean! No! I know it doesn’t sound very subtle, but that’s not the point. They’ve presented us, literally, with the classic locked-room paradox! They could be doing anything in there, but we can’t check because of the possibility that we’ll be in breach of contract!’

Lolita tapped the handset, absently and gently, against her front teeth, lost for a moment in thought. For a moment, with her sculpted smile like a snarl, it looked as if she were savaging the phone.

Then she raised the handset to her ear again.

‘All we can hope for is for some outside factor to come along and break the deadlock.’ She thought about this possibility for a small while – and then the snarl of her smile, quite suddenly, became more pronounced.

‘We *may* get lucky,’ she said into the phone. ‘Who knows?’

Big Finish Productions Limited, it must be noted, has no connection with MegaStel Enterprises whatsoever.

We therefore have a slightly different arrangement, with Professor Bernice Summerfield, as regards the whole subject of rolling around in bed and doing it and stuff.

‘Oh, wow!’ shouted Jason, banging on the headboard. ‘Blimey! Mother of God, I never knew it could be like this!’

‘You can stop doing that, now,’ said Benny. ‘You only have to do that when room-service buzzes on the door and I tell them we’re busy so just push the tray inside, to stop Lolita sending in a microcam on the grounds that ordering a tray of dinner from room-service isn’t anything particularly mucky so it’s fair game.’

‘Depends on what you’re ordering for dinner, and what you do with it when it arrives,’ said Jason. ‘Anyway, it’s funny.’

‘The first five or six times, yes,’ said Benny. ‘After that it somewhat began to pall.’

It was some hours into the Great Bedroom Siege. Recriminations had long-since occurred concerning the question of Jason having got them into this mess in the first place.

Flaming rows had been had, and such restitutions as were needed made. Readers are invited to imagine as much subsequent rolling around in bed and doing it and stuff as they might like – while bearing in mind that neither Benny nor Jason were seventeen years old, or locked together in the first demented rush of a new relationship, or on

a couple of glucose drips.

That, at least, is the report of those two principally concerned, the last time they were asked: the situation had simply devolved into one of chatting and relaxing, catching up on their reading and just generally hanging out. They had certainly not been at it and ravening away at each other for hours on end like a couple of rampant stoats. Or so they say, and who are we to argue?

In any event, as they lay together now, gently steaming, they realised that the time had somehow got away from them and it was getting on well towards dawn. It was really time to be thinking about sleep.

‘Long lie in tomorrow,’ said Benny, ‘but what are we going to do after that? Well, all right, but after that... I really can’t see us just rattling around in this room together for a week. We’d end up killing each other – and not in a good way.’

Then a horrible thought struck her. ‘Jason? This deal you had with MegaStel is time-limited, isn’t it? I mean, they’re not going to keep messing us around forever until we’re split-up, dead or both?’

‘What do you take me for?’ said Jason. ‘Of course it’s just for a week.’

‘Thank goddess for that.’

‘I’m almost certain it’s just for a week.’

Benny preferred to believe that this last was merely kidding.

‘You know what I think?’ she said after a while.

‘Mm?’ said Jason, in the tones of one in the process of dropping off.

‘I say we have a good long lie-in tomorrow, nice big breakfast, and then we just go out there and damn their eyes and dare them to do their worst.’

‘Mmm muffmumffum mm?’

‘What?’

‘Is that a good idea?’ Jason yawned. ‘I mean, they’ve had time to regroup, now. Have a bit of a think and come up with something really nasty.’

‘Probably. On the other hand, in the end, I really doubt there’s anything MegaStel are capable of throwing at us that could truly mess us up. We’re both quite capable of doing that for ourselves.’

And now, at last, they slept – for a grand total of three minutes before the telephone receiver beside the bed began to peal.

Both Benny and Jason were still keyed-up enough to jolt awake instantly, if painfully and in a rotten temper. They regarded the ringing phone thoughtfully. And not to mention bad-temperedly.

‘They’re opening the box,’ said Jason. ‘What do you think? Is it a trick or not?’

'I doubt if there's any way we can ever really know,' said Benny.

'What the hell,' said Jason. 'Let's see what they want.' Being nearest, he picked up the receiver. 'Yeah?'

For quite some while he listened, nodding in the way that people do when on the phone even when there's nobody who can see. At length he said, 'I understand,' and put down the receiver. He was visibly shaken.

'Well?' said Benny, frowning in anticipation. 'What is it?'

'It's all off,' said Jason.

'What's off?'

'The show. Celebrity Split. The whole thing. That was the Security Service, and they want to ask us some questions. Lolita's been brutally stabbed.'

'How perfectly fiendish,' Benny said, eyes bright and alive with the spirit of investigation. 'Brilliant and clever, of course, but perfectly fiendish.'

They had left their suite to find absolutely no one waiting for them but a pair of Security Servicemen in the lobby. Of Delbert and Tarquentine the bodyguards there had been no sign. The Servicemen had driven them by prowler to the Central Security building and a brightly lit and pristine waiting area.

It was the sort of police-related environment where the tough and streetwise Detroit cop, new in town and investigating the gangland murder of his loser pal, looks around while mugging furious astonishment at the splendour of it, orders a latte from the desk-sergeant and the entire movie going audience goes, 'Sodding hell, they're not even trying anymore, are they.'

Benny and Jason now sat, on stylish and expensively constructed but still hard and uncomfortable chairs, waiting to be interrogated. They were wearing the by now somewhat more than unkempt and sweat-stained clothes they had worn the day before. (They had tried, before leaving the Starsail, loudly saying things like, 'Gosh, what we could really do with, now, is an expensive selection of new clothes to chose from!' but nothing had happened – further evidence that MegaStel had, indeed, summarily pulled the plug.)

'What was that?' Jason asked Benny. 'What was that you were saying about fiendish cleverness?'

'Think about it, Jason,' Benny said. 'As long as we had those MegaStel microcams following us about, we had perfect alibis for anything – any and all number of people knew precisely where we were at any given time...'

'Uh, Benny...' Jason said.

'But then we contrive to place ourselves incommunicado for a

while. I mean, people can infer where we are on the simple basis that we go into a room to have a lot of sex and don't come out – but there's no hard and incontrovertible evidence for that. It's not impossible to imagine one of us off crawling through ventilation ducts or the like while the other one bangs on the headboard and shouts, "Mother of God, I never knew it could be like this!"...'

'Benny...'

'At that *precise* same time, the murder is committed – and the victim happens to be the very woman who, a few hours earlier, I called out and threatened in a very public hotel lobby. Do you know what I think, Jason? We've been set up. We're being framed. So how were we manipulated to make that possible? Who was pushing the buttons that had us contriving to destroy our own alibi? What we need to do is draw up a list of the available suspects...'

'Well, top of the list, I suppose,' said Jason, 'would be the guy who the Security Service knows actually did it.'

There was a pause.

'What?' said Benny.

'The guy who did it. They already have him in custody. That's what they told me on the phone.'

Benny thought about this for a moment. 'How did they catch him?'

'Lolita told them. She wasn't murdered or anything, just brutally stabbed. She's in the hospital with a blood pack plugged in her arm and a Serviceman sitting next to her taking notes. Then again of course, being Lolita, it's probably either engine-oil or Botox being plugged into her arm. Did I forget to mention that?'

'Do you know, Bernice,' said Humphrey Pumpkin, 'a census-taker tried to classify me once.'

'Oh, urn, yes?' said Bernice. 'What happened?'

'Well, the pen he gave me to fill in the form ran out. But that was all right. I had another one in my pocket. It was a different colour, but he said that didn't matter. So that was all right.'

Benny looked the enormously fat young man over as he sat there on the cot, pale and shaking. He was wearing Service-issue disposable paper coveralls, which had contrived to become grease-stained even in the white and sterile holding cell, presumably from the ingrained oils leaking from his pores.

His bloodstained Mister Meaty Burger Franchise (Zardox) uniform, she gathered, complete with name tag sporting 'Hi! I'm Humphrey!' and one and a half stick-on Stars of Achievement, was down in Forensics.

'Professor Summerfield?' said Humphrey. There was something strange about his manner, Benny thought – a sense of wild, blind,

wound-up panic that didn't seem quite to sit right, even in the less than ordinary context of him being a young man charged with Assault with a Deadly Weapon and in a cell.

'Yes, uh, Humphrey?' she said.

Humphrey Pumpkin's face screwed up as if in agony. Then: *'I-just-wanted-to-say-that-I've-got-all-your-adventures-and-you're-just-so-great-and-you-know-I-sort-of-think-about-you-and-sort-of-love-you-but-not-in-that-way-because-I-know-that-nobody-could-ever-love-me-in-that-way-because-I-got-fat-I'm-not-saying-it-right-but-I-just-wanted-to-say-that-meeting-you-like-this-was-the-best-thing-that-ever-happened-to-me-in-my-life!'*

The words erupted from him in a rush, as though something inside him had physically exploded, leaving him bewildered and shaking.

'Why... thank you, Humphrey,' said Benny. She had no real idea of what to say. 'That means a lot to me. Really.' She turned to the Detective Serviceman beside her in the cell doorway. 'I'm sorry. I don't recognise him at all. I don't think there's any way I can be much help.'

'They call them Spalkers, apparently,' Benny said. 'That's what the Detective Serviceman told me, anyway. It's a cross between "stalker" and "spod". They get obsessed by someone they find out about in *Les Aventures de la Frontière Nouvelle*, and then just basically wander around the galaxy, supporting themselves by a series of menial jobs, getting fat on fast food, trying to find the people their obsessions were based on.

'There are whole communities of them on GalNet Forums, apparently. You know, keeping in touch with each other, giving each other encouragement and support, shrieking hysterically at each other over which version of a character they like the best. It's all just a bit sad, really.'

'Sounds like just another sorry bunch of pricks to me,' said Jason, grumpily. He was probably grumpy because the Security Service hadn't even thought it worthwhile asking him any questions, the case being so obviously open and shut. He could have stayed back at the Starsail and had a kip.

Then again, he might have just been missing the attentions of his Fans. Without MegaStel involvement to whip up and choreograph the frenzy, the sheer number of them on the streets seemed to have petered out. It was well into the morning, now, and he hadn't been chased by a horde of knickerwaving adolescents even once. Just another of those things you don't start missing until they're gone.

Now they were travelling in a cab they had hailed after leaving Central Security. In some strange way, even after only a day of having

it, it felt odd not to have Delbert and Tarquentine the bodyguards unobtrusively opening the doors on a limousine that appeared as if by magic. That had seemed normal. That had just been what it was like to be on Zardox... and now it was, quite suddenly, as if they were on an entirely different planet. A whole new world.

‘Yes, well, obviously,’ Benny said, apropos sorry bunches of pricks. ‘But sometimes they end up hurting people in pathetic and squalid and – I don’t know – human ways. As opposed to the way people get hurt in the holovids. Hurting others or themselves.

‘Anyway. It seems that Lolita came across this Humphrey Pumpkin, and learned that he was obsessive about the *Frontière Nouvelle Adventures* starring you and me. She kept him on ice. Kept him in her back pocket and off the books. Had her psycho-conditioning people work him over, on an informal basis, to unbalance him still further. I suppose she was planning to use him in one of her “carefully controlled” scenarios somewhere down the line. Maybe a botched kidnapping-attempt or some such.

‘When we went and locked ourselves in the bedroom to have a lot of sex, though, she decided to try something desperate to break the deadlock. She wound Humphrey Pumpkin up, gave him a hunting knife, told him where we were and set him loose. The idea, I suppose, was that with a madman bursting in with a knife, the last thing on anybody’s mind would be rolling around in bed and doing it and stuff. MegaStel would have the excuse of coming in to save us from bodily harm. Anything that happened after that would be quite firmly within the public domain...’

‘So what went wrong?’ Jason asked. ‘Why did he end up brutally knifing Lolita?’

‘Lolita made a subconscious and fundamental mistake,’ said Benny. ‘She’s a Zardox woman through and through, and as far as Zardox is concerned, you’re the star and I’m the inconvenient hanger-on. Pumpkin was born on where did they say it was? Banjo Colony, something like that – and so far as he was concerned, I was the beautiful and deadly space-adventuress of his dreams, and you were just the dimwitted sidekick who isn’t good enough for me and everybody hates. And so, of course, when Lolita told him to go off and stab me instead of you...’

They arrived back at the Starsail to find a somewhat odd-looking little man waiting for them in the lobby. In his pinstripe suit and little bowler hat he looked every inch the cartoon-stereotype of a lawyer. As such, he could only be a legal representative from MegaStel.

‘I must apologise for the recent unpleasantness,’ he told them with in-character prissiness. ‘Rest assured that MegaStel Enterprises, as a

corporate entity, is entirely aware that our employee, Ms Lolita de Salamo, acted entirely inappropriately in attempting to have one, or another, or both of you horribly murdered in your bed, where you were apparently having a lot of sex, and are prepared to make appropriate reparation for the remainder of your stay on Zardox. If you'll just sign this release form...?'

He proffered a clipboard, to which was clipped a sheet of paper, on which was printed, in large and blocky capitals:

**WE FORGIVE MEGASTEL FOR BEING MEAN TO US, AND
MEGASTEL WILL GIVE US LOTS OF MONEY AND NICE PRESENTS
AND BE REALLY NICE TO US TO MAKE UP FOR IT**

Benny raised an eyebrow. 'I can't help noticing that the language is not as... sophisticated as it might be.'

'I must apologise again,' the legal representative said. 'I'm afraid we're rather more used, in the ordinary scheme of things, to dealing with media celebrities.'

'That's a bit of a relief,' said Jason, as they left the legal representative and headed for the elevators. 'I'd forgotten how expensive Zardox was without an expense-account. I don't mind telling you, paying for that cab ride nearly wiped me out.' He yawned hugely. 'And speaking of being wiped out, I'm shattered.'

'I have to admit,' said Benny. 'I'm feeling none too fresh myself. What do you say to getting back to that long lie-in?'

'I don't think I'd say anything,' Jason said, 'on account of being sparko the second I hit the mattress.' He peered at their bedraggled and bleary reflections in the mirrored elevator doors. 'I think we could both spend some time being dead.'

The elevator announced its arrival with a chime. The doors slid back. They walked into a box full of plush carpet, mirrors, polished brass and restrained string symphonics. The doors whispered shut behind them with a small, but satisfying, quality-car-door clunk.

Jets of knock-out gas burst from the walls with a sound like a faucet turned full on. 'Oh bloody hell!' Jason exclaimed. 'Who uses knock-out gas in elevators anymore?'

They were dead to the world before their heads hit the carpet.

Eight

There is a convention, in a certain sort of fiction, that when a pair of characters are rendered simultaneously unconscious by anaesthetic darts, knock-out drops or even jets of gas from elevator walls, the action picks up again when the second one wakes up.

This allows him, or her, to interrogate the first one, who has been up and about for quite some time, as to just what the hell might be going on in a suitably telegraphic manner.

It was therefore a little annoying for Benny to wake up, rattling around in the passenger compartment of a helicopter, to see that Jason was slumped on a seat the other side from her and still spark out.

‘He’s bigger than me,’ she grumbled to herself. ‘He’s got more body-weight. He should have been up and about long ago.’ She turned to one of the armed and quasi-military uniformed guards who were silently and impassively bracketing her and said, brightly: ‘On the other hand, he’s a mouthy git, so he probably got more of the gas.’

‘I heard that,’ said Jason, looking up. ‘I was just resting my eyes.’

‘Thank the Goddess for that,’ said Benny. ‘So tell me, Jason, just what the hell is going on? As telegraphically as possible, if you please.’

Jason looked around, theatrically. ‘We’re in the passenger compartment of a great big chopper, you should pardon the expression, I thank you, surrounded by armed and quasi-military uniformed minions. What are the odds.’ He looked out the window. ‘We’re over the sea. And there’s more sea. Look at all that sea. It’s blue. What the hell do you want me to – hang on, we’re coming up on something.’

‘What,’ said Benny. ‘What are we coming up on?’

‘Hang on... I can almost – oh bloody hell.’

‘What is it.’

Jason sighed. ‘It’s a bleeding oil platform.’

‘I wasn’t aware that Zardox had any oil deposits,’ said Benny. ‘Bleeding or otherwise.’

‘It doesn’t,’ said Jason, heavily. ‘I recognise the thing. And unless I very much miss my guess, it’s a Floating Lair of Villainy, Mark II.’

‘You seem very sure...’ said Benny.

‘Page forty-two of the Acme of Evil™ catalogue,’ said Jason. ‘Standard plant-suppliers for the various guys around the galaxy who are involved in a certain kind of racket. They sell the stuff like people used to sell bongos in places where dope was illegal, you know?’ He shrugged. ‘I was looking through the literature a while ago, back when

I was trying to set up a scam I, uh, mean business deal – where it seemed like it might be a good idea to impersonate an evil criminal mastermind.’

‘I can see where that might be a bit of a stretch,’ said Benny, on the basis of never knowingly wasting a feed-line, even if one happens to be rattling around in a helicopter and bracketed by quasi-military uniformed minions. ‘Especially the bit about being a mastermind.’

‘The stuff was too expensive, though,’ Jason said. ‘Too rich for my blood. In the end I just went with the Gangland Psycho Who’s Still Good to His Mum, because all I needed was a new suit, a straight-edge razor and a Barbara Windsor impersonator.’ He scowled, a little worriedly. ‘I’ll tell you this: the guy down there looks like the real deal, whoever he is.’ He took another look out of the window and nodded to himself. ‘It’s got the optional pontoon-spandrels and everything. I think we’re actually in quite a lot of trouble.’

As the armed quasi-military uniformed minions frogmarched Benny and Jason from the helipad, Benny could see what Jason had meant about the floating platform being ordered from a catalogue. It was like the set and model-work of every spy-adventure movie you had ever seen, made real and designed to actually work.

There was nothing ridiculous about it. It was just a standard piece of kit if you were engaged in a particular variety of criminal extortion – in the same way that if you made your living as a sharpshooter, it was probably a good idea to own an actual gun. There was a definite sense that the platform had, originally, arrived in easy-to-assemble modular flat-packs.

Waiting for them on the deck beyond the helipad gantry, standing before them now, was a bald-headed man in a beige suit, clutching a somewhat annoyed-looking long-haired white cat. The simple and traditional (overly traditional, these days) costume and accoutrements of a man in a certain position, in a certain line of business – and no more remarkable than putting on a suit and tie to go to the office. It was just what you wore if you had a particular job.

This man didn’t look that happy in his job, however. There are some men, frankly, who can get away with shaving their heads. On others it just makes them look pudgy and bulbous. The beige suit didn’t quite sit on him right, in the way suits don’t if you’re uncomfortable in them. He didn’t know the proper way to hold a cat, either.

The man was flanked by a pair of sallow and decidedly average-looking young women in bikinis, posing in mirrored approximations of a martial-arts stance. They seemed a bit bored. One of them was chewing gum.

‘Professor Summerfield,’ this man now said, in somewhat

incongruous London Basin tones. 'At last we – *Jesus* bleeding Christ!'

The long-haired cat, sickening at last of being held in the completely wrong manner, had sunk its teeth into the fleshy part between his forefinger and thumb. The bald man flung it from him viciously.

The cat somersaulted tonelessly in the air in the way that cats do, hit the deck running and shot off to hide behind one of the escape pods arranged along the edge of the platform. The bikini-clad girl with the gum sighed, broke her pose and frumped off to try and coax it out.

'Bastard!' The bald man sucked at his bleeding hand, then pulled a none too clean handkerchief from his trouser pocket and applied it as a makeshift bandage.

'Let's try that again, shall we?' he said, visibly bringing himself under control. 'Professor Summerfield. At last we meet. You may call me –'

'Puss?' the girl with the gum called. 'Puss-puss-puss-puss-puss?'

The bald-headed man glowered, counted under his breath and regained his composure. 'You may call me –'

'I think it's got into the launching mechanism,' said the girl with the gum. 'I can't see it.'

'Just leave it where it is, all right!' the bald man snapped. 'Jesus. I mean, is it any wonder we can never get anything done?' He took a deep, calming breath. 'All right. Professor Summerfield, at last we meet. You may call me –'

There was the chunk of electromagnetic bolts, the whirr of servos, the yowl of a startled cat – and the concussive detonation of a rocket-powered escape pod launching itself into the air.

Some small time later, there was a distant splash.

And then a gentle rain of cat.

What was left of it, anyway. Its component parts, in any case. We can keep going on about bits of dead cat falling from the sky if you still, for some strange reason, don't get the picture.

The bald-headed man put his head in his hands. He stood there for a while, stock still, massaging his temples with crabbed fingers.

'Guards?' he said, at last, with a sense of towering restraint. 'Take Professor Summerfield and her friend away to the holding cells, would you, if you would be so kind? We can interrogate them after we sort out this little lot.'

'Is there anything,' Benny said, 'that you feel you should be telling me?'

'Not that I'm aware of,' Jason said. 'Why do you ask?'

'I'm just wondering if all that stuff with Lolita, MegaStel and Celebrity Split was just a cover. You know, just to get you onto

Zardox, and this was what you were really interested in.'

'Not me,' said Jason. Not this time.'

'Just thought I'd ask. It wouldn't be the first time you've done something along those lines.' Benny thought about it. 'Nor me, come to that.'

They were in a steel-balked cabin, the hatch dogged from the outside.

The cabin contained a folding bunk without a mattress, barely wide enough to accommodate one person sleeping on their side when folded down, and nothing else. A tiny porthole gave access to nothing but a view of a flat expanse of blue sea.

'You know what's happened, don't you,' Benny said.

Jason nodded. 'The guy caught wind that that we were here on Zardox, recognised the names, thought we were investigating whatever scam it is he's up to and decided to scoop us up.'

'And the problem with that,' Benny said, 'is that we're completely off the script. We don't have any plan of escape, we don't have shoe-heels full of lock picks, or miniature lasers in our watches – and there's certainly no squad of machine-gun-toting marines waiting out there to storm in and rescue us.'

'I was right, then,' said Jason, gloomily. 'We are actually in quite a bit of trouble at this point.'

Benny started going through her pockets.

'What are you doing?' Jason asked her.

'Going through my pockets. Might as well see if there's anything at all on us that we can use.'

'Benny,' Jason said. 'These clothes were supplied brand new by MegaStel, when they were fresh. There was absolutely nothing in the pockets, and I know for a fact that – hello, what's this?'

While opining that the searching of pockets was useless, Jason had automatically been doing just that thing. Now he drew a folded and by now quite crumpled scrap of paper from his trouser pocket.

'How did that get in there?' he wondered. 'Nobody's been near my... oh. Right. It must have been put in there when, uh...'

'Put in there where and when, precisely?' Benny asked, sweetly. 'Put in there by whom?'

'Nobody at all,' said Jason quickly. 'Just someone I thought was being friendly. It's a note.'

He unfolded the article in question. Time spent in the trousers of Jason Kane had not been kind to it. Whatever might have once been written on the note had long since been smudged to indecipherability. Only a few words remained legible:

'If you are in...' he read aloud, *'... and I can't make out the next bit. Then there's the words say my name... and then the rest of it's just*

smudged up until the end and what looks like the word Bitch...'

'Say my name, bitch?' said Benny, not exactly warmly. 'Now why on earth, Jason, should I be surprised that somebody's given you a note saying say my name, bitch?'

'Benny!' Jason was wounded to the quick. 'You know it doesn't say that. Those are just the words I recognise. And I think that last word is actually Bitches...'

'Oh, really? And that's better, is it?'

'... and there's a little love-heart after it.' Jason peered closely at the crumpled note again. 'There's this word, here, that looks a bit like three-something...'

'Three-way? Threesome?'

'May you live to regret those unkind thoughts upon my moral character and rectitude. I suppose it could be something like three times and... oh.'

'That many, eh...?' Benny had been concentrating so hard on being pert that, for a moment, she had missed that fact that Jason was just standing there, deep in thought, mulling over the idea that had just occurred to him.

'What is it, Jason?' she asked.

'It's... no.' Jason shook his head as if to clear it. 'No. I'm not going to tell you, yet – it'll just sound incredibly stupid. It'll have to wait until I try it. Then it won't matter if I'm wrong and stupid, because we'll just be dead.'

Some half an hour later, a squad of quasi-military uniformed minions undogged the hatch and dragged Benny and Jason off through the bowels of the floating platform to a cavernous and steel-walled chamber.

Monorails shuttled through it, hauling pallet-trains of indefinable but no doubt lethally villainous cargo. There were banks of complicated switches and blinking lights along one wall, operated by minions in radiation-suits. A big alphanumeric screen displayed a countdown, counting down from 00:32:04 in decrements that seemed just a little bit too long to be decrementing in seconds.

Off to one side, Jason noticed, was a surgical table with integral shackles and a somewhat bulky laser-cutter unit suspended above it on an arrangement of servo-powered gimbals. (1995.99 cr. Acme of Evil™ Retro Range, page 47.)

This last worried Jason more than a little. If you're going to spend nearly two thousand credits on a new toy, you're going to want to try it out at some point.

The bald-headed man stood, in the centre of the chamber, watching the countdown. There was no sign of a long-haired cat. Probably

because such remains as might be retrieved had not proved pleasant to hold, far less stroked in a suitably languid and evilly villainous fashion.

‘Professor Summerfield,’ he said. ‘At last we meet.’

‘Again?’ said Benny.

‘What?’ the bald man said.

‘We already met once,’ said Benny, brightly. ‘During an incident that I shall be subsequently recording in my diary as *The Incident of the Catapulted Pussy*. So you should be saying something along the lines of, “Professor Summerfield, we meet again,” or suchlike – and not so much of the “at last we meet” because, frankly, that ship has sailed.’ She smiled in a friendly fashion. ‘I’m only mentioning this to be helpful.’

Jason knew what Benny was trying to do – indeed, in his time, he had seen her talk her way out of situations far more perilous than this, layering inconsequentiality on inconsequentiality to the point where an antagonist didn’t realise he’d had the piss comprehensively taken out of him, and was still standing there in bemusement five minutes after Benny had strolled out. He hoped to God it would work this time, because otherwise he was going to have to try something really, really stupid.

The bald man rubbed at his bald head, where it seemed a vein had started to throb of its own accord.

‘Very well,’ he said. ‘We meet... again. And you may call me –’

Benny held up a hand.

‘Now, if I can just stop you right there,’ she said, ‘before you say anything we might all regret. I want to make one thing perfectly and absolutely clear...’

She gestured toward Jason. ‘I and Jason here do not, at this point, have the slightest idea who you are, not a single clue as to whatever dastardly and nefarious scheme you might be about – and furthermore, we don’t care. We’re here on holiday, plain and simple. Nothing more, nothing less... and the last thing we need, at this point, is to hear the sort of information that would force you to have us killed, in the same way that kidnappers have to kill the victims who see their faces.’

‘Uh, Benny...’ said Jason, as something occurred to him.

‘Quiet, Jason. So if the next thing you want to say to me...’ this latter to the bald-headed man, of course, ‘... is along the lines of, “So, Professor Summerfield, how did you discover that I, the galaxy-famous Doctor Gaylord T Demento, was plotting to turn all the cheese on Zardox into plutonium, thus disrupting the economy of the cheese-pressing industry and laying the way open for invasion by the plutonium-eating mutant mice of Praxis Beta,” then I’d advise you to

think again.'

Bernice looked pointedly around the room, her gaze taking in the baldheaded man, the quasi military guards and the radiation-suited minions, who had all stopped what they were doing to have a listen.

'Are we all clear on that?' she asked. 'Good.'

She turned back to regard the bald-headed man with an air of amiable defiance. 'You were saying?'

The bald man was looking at her blankly. Jason – a man with more experience than somewhat of being on the receiving end of Benny – had an idea how he felt. And, it must be said, he felt a breath of sympathy despite himself.

Then the bald man, with a shudder, took possession of himself again.

He returned Benny's stare, measure for measure.

'If I understand you correctly,' he said, 'then you are saying that having you brought here was nothing more than a... mistake. It would have been better for all concerned to have simply left you alone.'

'Give the man a peanut,' said Benny, rather smugly.

Oh, bollocks, Jason thought. I'm going to *have* to do something really, really stupid. The bald man nodded to himself, as though reaching some conclusion with extreme reluctance.

'You're right, of course,' he said. 'I can even see it from your point of view. You were perfectly happy where you were, and having a lot of sex, from what I gather. Bringing you here was just a simple and pointless mistake. Even I can see that, now. The thing about that, though... is that you're *here* now.'

'We can go away again if you'd like...' said Benny, her maintained sense of certainty faltering a little. And in that slip, her face said it all.

She'd been trying to make a ridiculous argument in the first place – that the *reasons* why they were to face certain death somehow mitigated the fact that they were here to face certain death. She'd just been hoping against hope that that argument wouldn't show itself up for what it was.

'It doesn't matter if you know who we are,' the bald man said, now, 'or what our plans are. The fact is that you know we even exist.'

'Jason?' Benny said to Jason out of the side of her mouth.

'Yes?' said Jason.

'That fact means that we can never let you go to tell the tale,' the baldheaded man was saying. 'You've "seen our faces" as you so charmingly put it, Professor Summerfield...'

'You know you had a really, really stupid idea?' Benny said, still out of the corner of her mouth.

'I remember that,' said Jason, just as if it hadn't been the Gorgon of his thoughts for the last half an hour.

‘... and I really don’t think it would be wise to allow you to live.’ The baldheaded man gestured to the armed quasi-military guards, who closed in, bringing up their weapons.

‘If you’re going to do something really, really stupid, Jason,’ Benny hissed. ‘I think it might be an idea to do it now.’

‘All right, I will,’ said Jason.

The bald-headed man gestured, once again, to his minions. ‘Make it –’

‘Hang on!’ Jason shouted, waving a hand. ‘Hello?’

Later – when he thought about it – he would work out that because the baldheaded man’s attention had been fixed on Benny, and nobody else had been paying much attention to him, his shout had come from a completely unexpected direction and plunged the entire chamber into a moment of shock as they tried to work out where it had come from.

At the time, though, he just felt blessed relief that he wasn’t instantly cut down in a hail of automatic fire.

The bald-headed man turned to look at him. It was as if he had literally failed to notice Jason’s existence before.

‘Ah, yes,’ he said. ‘The dimwitted sidekick. I’d almost forgotten about you. Not to worry, though. You get shot out of hand, too. Shot in the head.’

‘Yes, well, before I do,’ said Jason. ‘I have one thing to say. Though I have to warn you, it’s probably very, very stupid.’

‘You do?’ The bald-headed man pursed his lips for a moment, rather prissily, considering the matter. Then: ‘Very well. What do you have to say?’

‘Well, it’s three things, actually,’ said Jason, ‘though it would probably be more accurate to say that all three of them are really the same thing. Or the same thing said three times...’

The bald man waved a hand impatiently. ‘Knock yourself out, my old son. Say what you want and get it over and done with, why don’t you.’

‘All right, I will,’ said Jason.

And he did.

Nine

There was a sound like a thunderclap. It was, for an instant, as if the air was split in two. A rip opened up in the fabric of the world – and something came hurtling out of it.

For an instant, to every horrified human eye that might behold it, it was a... thing that human beings could not look at without their eyeballs bleeding.

Then it shimmered, and twisted itself around itself, and hit the ground with a thump.

Damian Agrazoth, the demon-spawn, bounced to his feet and looked around himself wildly. Out of all those here, only Jason was in a position to appreciate that his manner and demeanour were different from those which he usually wore in his humanoid form. A large part of this, no doubt, was due to the fact that he was now wearing a spanky suit of close-impact-grade combat-spec body armour.

His eyes fixed on Jason, and he grinned. ‘Nice one! I knew you’d come through for us!’

He raised his hand in what first seemed like a thumbs-up sign – and then he hooked his thumb over and dragged it down the very fabric of the world, tearing it open in an explosion of magnesium light. A hole in the world from here to there.

The portal opened up, and five figures dived through it – hitting the steel-mesh floor of the chamber to bounce-roll into positions of combat-readiness that made sallow and average-looking girls in bikinis look sick.

Once again, out of all those here, Jason was the only one in a position to appreciate how these new arrivals had changed from any other context they might have been seen in. The patent leather cat suits and the heavy-duty weaponry, to a certain frame of mind, were a distinct improvement in any number of ways.

‘Are we ready to do this thing?’ Shawna the Glitta Bitch yelled, like she was asking a crowd to scream yeah. ‘Then let’s do it!’

And the Glitta Bitches broke their pose-formation, and proceeded to kick seven shades of shite out of the bald-headed man and his minions.

‘All right there?’ Demon-spawn Damian asked Benny and Jason, as they finally made it to the hatchway that would, eventually, lead out of the chamber and up to the floating platform’s deck. He was sitting there, back to the balk, and smoking an insouciant rollup, seemingly just waiting for all the violence and the carnage and the whatnot to sort itself out.

‘To a certain extent,’ Jason said.

Benny, for her part, was doing the thing of trying to fight off mental and physical shock to the point where she could say anything coherent. At this point she was still failing.

Back in the main part of the chamber, explosions were happening, automatic fire was stitching and bodies were variously flying around. A foot, still in its quasi-military boot, bounced off a nearby stanchion.

‘Shouldn’t you be back there helping out your, uh, girls?’ Jason asked.

‘Nah.’ Damian grinned in that sharp-toothed way that had half of those who might see it want to run for the tree line, and the other half wanting to present their throat to it. The problem was that both of those halves tended to reside in the same person.

‘They hate it when I try to muscle in on their fun,’ he said. He took another draw on his rollup. ‘Besides, I’m just this stone-cold lover, not a fighter, you know? I wouldn’t know where to start.’

Absently, he lifted a hand and ejected a demon-spine, from his wrist, into the left eye of a quasi-military minion who was running for the hatch. The body fell back to be lost in smoke and fire.

‘I’m just the delivery man,’ he said. ‘I mean, I help out with the cover-identity and all that, coming it like the sinister manipulating presence behind a bunch of brainless bimbos – but my main function is to get the girls where they need to go. I’ve gotta thank you for that, by the way. I wouldn’t have been able to get an in unless you said those three little words.’

‘Think nothing of it,’ said Jason. ‘I have to tell you, though, it was a pretty near thing. And I only worked it out because I spent time in the Demon Dimensions, once, and know what it’s possible for demon-spawn to do. It might be an idea not to count on poor brains like mine to work these things out.’

‘Another manipulation?’ Benny had found her voice again. And it was the voice of one who had been disappointed and hurt, yet again, by the world and in a mood to start spreading the hurt around. ‘You. Demon-boy, or whoever you are. Have you been manipulating things so we ended up here?’

‘Now it’s at this point that you say it wasn’t like that at all,’ said Jason. ‘Saying it extremely hurriedly, would be my advice.’

‘It wasn’t like that at all,’ said Damian, hurriedly. ‘We met Jason here, purely by chance, and found out who he was. We ran a data-search and realised that you were here too, Professor Summerfield.’ He turned to Jason. That’s what Biz was doing with her laptop while the other girls were improvising on your small part.’

Not that small,’ said Jason, automatically. Then he caught the look

that Benny was giving him and had a completely spontaneous coughing fit. It must have been the smoke from all the carnage out there in the chamber.

‘I never saw a laptop,’ he said to Damian, when he recovered.

‘Well... that’s what we call it,’ said Damian. ‘Anyway. We realised that there was an off-chance that if the bad guys knew you were here, too, they might think that you were here working against them and pick you up. So we thought we’d better give you a heads-up on what to do if they did – and like I said, you came through like a champ.’

The tenor of the combat in the chamber seemed to change, now. It was almost impossible to see what was happening through the smoke and flare, but it was possible to discern what might be victory-cries.

‘Yeah, boys!’ came the voice of Biz, or possibly Loni. Or possibly Shawna, or Poodles, or Jinx. The one in the kick-ass patent leather cat-suit with a whole bunch of guns, anyway.

‘Do you know,’ said Damian, ‘I love the girly little poppets like my own flesh and ichor, but I can never quite understand why they shout some of the things they do. Maybe it’s a human thing.’

‘So, what do you think?’ asked Jason, as they made their way up the stairwell towards the upper deck. ‘Is it worth trying to find out what any of that was actually about?’

Behind them there was a concussion as the Glitta Bitches cleaned up a small pocket of quasi-military resistance, possibly with a frag-grenade.

‘I mean,’ Jason continued, ‘the good guys have basically won, and we helped, so it’s kudos and thanks of a grateful public all round. We could get ourselves a piece of that.’

‘You just want to get your knicker-waving fan-base back,’ said Benny. ‘Anyway, what makes you think the good guys won?’

‘Well it’s a silly thing, I know,’ said Jason, ‘but I’m sort of basing it on the fact that the people who kidnapped us and were going to kill us ended up with seven kinds of shite kicked out of them.’

‘Granted,’ Benny said. ‘But what makes you think that Damian the demon-spawn and your – ahem – five-piece girl band are necessarily the *good* guys? They could be anyone, doing what they’re doing for any reason.’

‘Oh, come on,’ said Jason. ‘How can a five-piece girl band in patent leather cat-suits with a bunch of guns not be the good guys? If five-piece girl bands in patent leather cat-suits with a bunch of guns aren’t the good guys then there’s just no justice in the world. I wouldn’t want to live in a world like that.’

‘So lets say, then,’ Benny said, ‘purely for the sake of argument, that all this has all been a territorial dispute over – I don’t know – who

gets control of the Zardox defence-grid so they can use it to blow up furry little puppy dogs? Would you feel happier knowing chat? What do you say?’

Jason thought about it. ‘I say, we’re on holiday. And if people want to go around blowing up puppy dogs, it’s none of our concern. Let’s leave them to it.’

‘My thoughts exactly.’ They had reached the main deck. Benny looked around. ‘What’s the plan, Sundance?’

Jason gestured towards the escape-pods ranged along the side of the deck.

‘I say we snaffle one of these, Butch. Aim it at the mainland and just go back to all the nice money and presents and things that MegaStel want us to have. And such rolling around in bed and doing it and stuff as the mood takes us.’ He grinned, evilly. ‘if you’re very lucky, I might show you my new party piece.’

‘I’ve had experience of your so-called party-pieces,’ Benny said, warily. ‘What’s this one?’

Jason shrugged. ‘Just a small thing I’ve been working on. You know, in the off-moments.’

‘How small?’ Benny asked.

‘Not that small.’

In a cavernous and steel-walled chamber, a bald-headed man in a beige suit stood before a screen as fire and smoke raged around him.

On the screen, the countdown now read: **00:00:32.**

‘You think you’ve won!’ the bald-headed man raved dementedly. ‘You haven’t won! Only my palm-print can stop the countdown, and that you shall never have!’

00:00:23.

‘Oh, yeah?’ cried Shawna the Glitta Bitch, throwing a grenade in the form of a lipstick. ‘Here – catch!’

00:00:20.

The lipstick-grenade detonated. ‘*Aieeeeeee!*’ screamed the bald-headed man as he blew spectacularly apart. Items of anatomy rained everywhere.

00:00:18.

In a trice, Loni the Glitta Bitch was on the remains, snatching up a severed forearm and hand.

00:00:17.

‘To me!’ Biz cried. Loni threw it to her and Biz snatched it out of the air...

00:00:16.

‘Here!’ called Poodles – and in one fluid movement the severed arm was passed to her.

00:00:14.

‘Endgame!’ Jinx the Glitta Bitch screamed from the other side of the chamber, where an illuminated panel throbbed with a sickly and baleful light.

00:00:12.

With one heroic throw, Poodles heaved the severed arm, turning hand over stump, in a high arc across the chamber.

00:00:10.

Jinx the Glitta Bitch somersaulted into the air, catching the severed arm with a desperately outflung hand. Landed. Gaspd for winded breath. Leapt forward with the last of her strength and slammed the severed arm’s hand into the illuminated panel.

00:00:08.

There was the sound of turbines winding down.

00:00:08.

The pulsing lights of the Cyclotronic Death Machine flickered and died.

00:00:08.

00:00:08.

00:00:08.

00:00:08.

Jinx the Glitta Bitch dropped the severed arm with a slightly squelchy thump. She looked down at it sardonically.

‘Thanks for the hand, man,’ she said.

‘And cut!’ Damian shouted. ‘That’s it! That’s great. And I do believe that’s a wrap!’

The scorched and scattered bodied of quasi-military uniformed figures stirred, extricating themselves from their prosthetic dismemberments. The sporadic fwosh! of fire-extinguishers as the flames were put out. A baldheaded man climbed out from behind a cutaway that had concealed all but his apparently severed head, wondering aloud if his final scream might just have been that little bit too over the top.

There was a smattering of applause – which rapidly grew to a roar as the Glitta Bitches linked hands and bowed deeply from the hips, grinning with the pure, proud joy of children finishing their first recital. And, it must be said, while a part of the applause came from knowing which side of the bread had the butter on it, a large part came from sharing the Glitta Bitches’ sense of joy. Say what you like, they knew how to put on a show.

Strangely, enough, only Loni the Glitta Bitch seemed a little less than happy.

‘But Damian,’ she pouted endearingly, ‘I don’t understand. If all he had to do was put his hand on the thing, why did he have to blow up,

and why did we have to do all the stuff with the arm...?’

‘Don’t worry about it, poppet,’ Damian tousled her hair in absent kind of way. ‘People won’t be watching this for the plot-holes.’

He clapped his hands for attention and walked out into the centre of the set. ‘Wonderful work, everybody,’ he announced. ‘We couldn’t have done this without you all. And I’d especially like to thank our very special guests, Professor Bernice Summerfield and Jason Kane!’

Applause.

‘I hope they’ll forgive us for the little subterfuge,’ Damian continued, ‘but as we know, my talent for teleportation only works when I’m summoned by someone in – or who thinks they’re in – mortal danger. I trust they’ll understand that our little white lie saved a small fortune on special effects and they...’ He looked around himself. ‘Where have they gone?’

Epilogue

Since the escape capsule commandeered by Bernice Summerfield and Jason Kane had, in the end, been nothing more than a part of a glorified holovid set, such non-cost-effective items as a Global Positioning System had never been installed.

Benny and Jason, therefore, drifted for five days and nights before being spotted and picked up by the Life Guard Service.

They were more fortunate than otherwise in that the escape capsules, on the floating platform, had been used as the equivalent of trailers on a land bound movie set – and doubly fortunate in that the one they chose had been one of those occupied by a Glitta Bitch. It had therefore been packed to the gunwales with the most sumptuous and expensive comestibles imaginable, as befits the accommodation for a star.

It is debatable as to whether this good fortune was increased or decreased by the fact that the Glitta Bitch in question was Poodles, or Shawna, the one who commonly wore the cute little fem-dom outfit, anyway, who rejoiced in the nickname, in the GalNet Tabloid-pages, of ‘Pervy Bitch’... and who had left a number of her personal possessions and accoutrements on-board the pod.

On this last subject, both Bernice and Jason have proved reluctant to comment. The nearest they come is a quote from immediately after their rescue, where they say that over five days and nights they nearly killed each other – but not in an entirely bad way.

‘Look at it this way,’ said Benny. ‘The enjoyment of unearned wealth is bad for the karma. If we’d been running around for five days and nights on unlimited MegaStel expenses, without having to do a stroke for it, we could have ended up being reincarnated as earthworms or such. We’re better people for it.’

‘Well, it could have been slightly less improving than getting to the point where we can step off the bleeding cycle entirely,’ Jason grumped. ‘I mean, we didn’t get so much as a souvenir.’

Indeed, the only items they had acquired over the course of the week were the clothes that MegaStel had given them at the start – and these had been worn to shreds by a week of hard wear. In fact, they had fallen completely to pieces on the second day in the drifting escape pod, leaving them naked save for increasingly ragged scraps of underwear. This is another subject on which Jason and Bernice are reticent to comment as to whether it was a good or bad thing.

The timing of their rescue and departure-schedule meant that there had been no time for so much as a few minutes’ shopping. They were

leaving Zardox in the clothes they had arrived in. They had lost and gained nothing.

‘It’s not the not getting of things that gets me,’ Jason said, as they waited in the PanGLOSS departure lounge feeling like a couple of tramps. ‘Not as such. If you get me. It’s the sense of not having something to hold on to.’

Benny raised an eyebrow. ‘If we’re going to be talking about holding on to things, then...’

‘Do you know, you’re developing a decidedly one-track mind,’ said Jason. ‘Oh yes?’ said Benny. ‘And what about you?’

‘Oh, I’ve got a none-track mind.’ Jason grinned. ‘It’s my default state, so I don’t have to think about it. Anyhow. My point about the things was that we’ve come away with nothing we can touch. The way that MegaStel messed with our realities, and then the weirdness on the platform, all the time alone in our own tiny floating world – it’s like we became detached from the real world. Went into a dream and started living there. And I’m not quite sure if I can wake up and come all the way back.’ He frowned. ‘Is that making any sense?’

Benny nodded thoughtfully. ‘I know the sort of thing you mean. The sense of dislocation. I suppose we’re just going to have to wait for it to pass.’

A discreet chime announced that the PanGLOSS was ready for boarding. They walked through the doors and into the sumptuously elegant travelling-chamber in a way that they thought of as simply strolling... but which an external and impartial observer might class as vague wandering, even blundering.

A man was already in the travel-chamber, waiting. He wore a scuffed leather trenchcoat with massively bulked shoulders, a fedora with a brim so disproportionately wide that it all-but matched them. He regarded Benny and Jason with hard, unkindly eyes.

‘Jason Kane?’ he asked, his voice gravelly and clenched.

‘Who?’ said Jason. ‘Oh, uh. Yeah. That’s me.’

The man flashed an ID card. ‘Dick Strangely, PI.’

‘Private Investigator...?’ Benny asked.

‘That’s Pirate investigator, you scum!’ Strangely snapped, with rather more force than seemed entirely necessary. ‘Jason Peter Kane, I have here a warrant for your arrest...’

‘Arrest?’ Jason was astonished. ‘What charge?’

‘Murder,’ the Pirate Investigator snarled.

They were back in the real world.

II

The Purpura Pawn

Paul Sutton

One

Acél had breasts. My god but she had breasts. He could only just about see the edge of one of them at the moment, half exposed – his night vision was shot to hell these days, too much time spent studying, and in any case she had her back to him and was a hundred metres away – but she had them, all right, oh yes. High and round. And firm. Okay, so he was guessing at that last bit but, Jeez, they sure looked firm. And she had hips too. And a waist. And an arse. Oh what an arse. The kind of arse that didn't need to be packed kicking and screaming into a pair of tight combats and had never known the word cellulite. And, okay, so he didn't know what that or any other kind of arse looked like in real life, so what? Acél had one, he just knew it. Acél was... perfect.

'Oi! Boyling. Boyling! Get with it.'

He'd never met a woman like her before. The way she moved, gracefully like a... like a... graceful something. On those long, slender legs. Those legs. And it was only mildly disconcerting that whenever she moved on them it was usually in order to make something die. But he could cope with that; it was, after all, the reason Oleson had hired her. And Oleson knew best.

'Boyling!'

Boyling didn't hear the sound of Windcott's boots slapping towards him through the oily puddles but he certainly felt the slap across the face he received once those boots had arrived. His glasses clattered lightly to the ground.

'Shit!'

'Pull yourself together, the mark'll be here in a minute.'

'What d'y have to hit me for, Windcott? You're always bloody hitting me.'

'Maybe I'm hoping it'll knock some sense into you one of these days.' Boyling knelt down and retrieved his glasses from the litter that had soaked into the ally then looked up to see if Acél had noticed this, his latest humiliation. She hadn't and he sighed with relief. Windcott followed his gaze and let out a sharp laugh. *'And you can forget about her too. If she wants anyone she'll want a real man and it'll be me she comes looking for, not some kid.'*

Boyling knew he was right. Acél wouldn't look – hadn't looked – twice at him, had hardly looked once for that matter in the two years she'd been in the outfit. Boyling had been apprenticed to Oleson for six years now, ever since he'd been expelled from the education block. Well, it was a skilled job. A craft. You didn't just pick this stuff up.

Before Acél, they'd used a retired mercenary who'd come back to

Earth from an off-world colony to die, then found life too boring to not be killing things. Collings. He'd been a head case, really volatile, but cheap; loved his work so much Oleson had hardly ever had to give him a cut of the job. After three years though he'd got sloppy: drinking heavily, not taking out the mark cleanly. Acél had heard this on the international underworld network – oh yes, Oleson's mob were pretty well respected – flown over from New Budapest on spec and simply killed him. Knife between the ribs. She always killed from the front. That had been her job interview for the gang: taking out the current incumbent of the position that hadn't even officially been made available yet. Boyling had fallen in love with her instantly. Oleson, he suspected, had been too scared to refuse her the job.

Before Collings, when Boyling had started his apprenticeship, the muscle had been Oleson's younger brother. A real family business. He'd got out of it, though. Taken his cut from a particularly lucrative mark – less than he was due, big brother had tried to make him take more – and left Earth. Boyling had thought Oleson was going to give the game up for a while then, business had been slow with the focus for Boyling on his studies rather than fieldwork. But Oleson loved what he did. He'd hired Collings and things had got back to normal.

So: two years. Two years working with this beautiful Hungarian-descent killing machine, with her endearing staccato English and her rich brown eyes and her bob of thick black hair and her wonderful breasts and her hips and her waist and her arse and her...

Windcott hit him again. This time Boyling considered thanking him.

Acél glanced over her shoulder, back down the ally through the darkness and the hot steam rising from the grated drain covers, and saw them squabbling again. Technically they were her back-up if anything went wrong. That was a laugh for a start. A couple of students, that's basically all they were. Oleson was the brains, she was the steel, and they were just hangers-on, picking up all they could so that one day they'd be able to mastermind their own outfits. 'Apprentices'. Christ how she hated students. She had no time for people who couldn't do their jobs and even less for those learning how to do them. In her more generous moments she thought Boyling was harmless enough, just followed her around like a sick puppy, but Windcott was older, should have more self-respect than to still be under someone else's wing. And the eyes in his gaunt face would never settle, as though he were always sizing things up. They were the eyes of the hunted, not the hunter.

So, these students were nothing and knew nothing. Oleson liked to have them behind her in case something went wrong and, if they hadn't been so pathetic, she'd've been insulted. No. She'd get the job

done tonight as she always got the job done. The mark would be dead before he hit the rainbow-greased puddles. Oleson's gang may not have turned out to be quite what she'd expected but she still got to kill things so that was okay.

She looked across the street to the broken neon fascia of the backstreet bar.

Ruined drunks and broken youths yelled at each other in loose groups around the entrance. Oleson had been inside with the mark for three minutes now. If he didn't show within another seven she went in.

The thin rain got a little thinner and Acél checked the blade and needle pistol on her belt. Then she stepped out of the alley and slowly crossed the street.

'Let's get this over with, shall we? I've got the payment, show me the item.' Preston R Antrim managed to get the sentences out despite nearly coughing himself hoarse: the smoke in the bar was so thick you could almost feel resistance as you walked through it. Five hundred years ago the movement had started on Earth to ban smoking in all public places and, after the initial disorganised quasi-riots, the legislation had been accepted. What it meant now, half a millennium on, however, was that all the major cities had been divided, irreversibly, into designated smoking and non-smoking zones. And the division affected more than recreational nicotine intake: over the years it had coloured the economic viability of each area. The prohibiting areas were predominant, of course, and attracted the cleaner, richer, smuggler people. Preston's kind of people. They attracted the money, the investment, the commerce. People in these zones seemed to hold the higher ground literally as well as morally because smoking areas became cellars, pits, holes of bars that you'd hardly be able to find twice. The smoking zones were limited in size at first in an attempt to stamp out the habit altogether, but they'd sprawled through the darker parts of the cities, grown into entire sub-districts. Some people had begun to call these districts the undercity.

When Oleson had set up the meeting in the undercity, Preston hadn't been surprised: the old man looked like he belonged here. He had slightly too long white hair which half-covered a face that was craggy and lined, and prickled with short white stubble. It made his age difficult to determine but something in the crookedness of his back, the weakness of his legs, told Preston this was an old man. How the hell did such a man survive in this business?

'I don't think you'll be disappointed.' Oleson reverently unwrapped the artefact from its soft pigskin cloth. Preston stared hard, his eyes locked onto Oleson's discreetly cupped hands beneath the lip of the

table.

And there it lay: a chess piece – a simple pawn – grey and chipped but with a curiously unnatural mottled effect, like foxing on the pages of an ancient book. The mark drew in a sharp involuntary breath of pure excitement.

‘The Purpura Pawn,’ he breathed reverently. ‘The symbol that once adorned the hilt of the sword of Primearch Ceatul XVI; the sword Ceatul wielded during his last great battle with Instigator Terastin; the battle that destroyed Ceatul’s Empire utterly.’ It was as though he were reciting a catechism. He paused, hesitantly moving a hand towards the icon, obviously afraid to touch it. ‘For Ceatul it symbolised the importance of the individual in the greater scale of war. The colouring isn’t original: it is Ceatul’s blood that inexplicably soaked into the figure so that now it seems to be rising from it. You know,’ he continued, deliciously delaying still further the moment that the artefact would be his, ‘many scholars have conjectured that that battle was the turning point in the history of the Domus System. Had the Empire not fallen, the planet wouldn’t have been thrown into such a devastating war and, five millennia later, the Earth colony ships wouldn’t have had such an easy entry into that area of space. There’d’ve been no colony on Aequitas, no opposition to the Earth Empire, no terrorism on Verum. Fascinating.’

‘You are, of course, satisfied as to the piece’s authenticity,’ commented Oleson in an attempt to break the mark’s reverie. Patrons of bars like this one had little or no interest in each other’s business, even if they could’ve seen through the opaque cumuli of smoke or heard over the white noise that passed for popular music these days; but one person staring hard into another’s lap and mumbling ecstatically to themselves would eventually turn a head or two even here.

‘Irrefutably. I’ve seen the newscasts. This was stolen from Governor Morton’s hotel room on Verum a few weeks ago. I must say your outfit deserves much respect, if such a word can be applied to thieves. And framing that deadbeat into the bargain: ingenious. They will eventually be looking for accomplices though of course; are you sure you can’t be traced to Earth?’

‘As long as you have kept our transaction secret, and continue to do so, the artefact will be yours for the rest of your life.’

‘The rest of my life.’ Preston rolled the phrase around his mouth as though he could taste it.

Nine-and-three-quarter minutes after he’d entered the bar, Antrim emerged onto the narrow street and walked straight into Acél. Still euphoric about his purchase, he didn’t immediately realise what was

going on.

'Do excuse me,' he said reflexively with a smile as though he had bumped into a woman leaving his office complex. A young, attractive woman... 'Come.'

...with the point of a knife sticking into the flesh just above his groin and unmistakably angled downwards. He felt a hot flush of fear.

'Come,' she repeated. But then he smiled.

Acél noticed the movement on the periphery to her left. She span behind Antrim, slipping her free arm around his neck and relocating the knife to the small of his back in a slicing motion that cut shallowly into his waist. Antrim screamed, a strangely fitting complement to the music that could still be heard thumping from the bar.

A bodyguard of some kind, disguised as one of the drunks. How had she missed that? He must have been there all day. Another stepped forward, this time to her right, distinguishing himself from the *proletariátus* by reaching across his body inside his long dirty coat for what would inevitably prove to be a gun. The guy on the left was now doing the same.

Acél pulled the mark into her, forcing the knife into his back, curiously silencing him with the suddenness of the action. Then in a single frictionless movement she pushed him to her right, freeing the blade, and got the needle pistol into her other hand. The bodyguard to the left hadn't quite drawn his weapon yet, so the razor-thin laser-shot from Acél's gun pierced his forearm first before burrowing into his chest and exploding from his back.

The thug to the right had been quicker but his line of sight was blocked by the figure of his employer shambling bloodily towards him, so he only managed to loose off a single blast before Acél's knife arrowed over Antrim's shoulder and splintered his skull, embedding itself to the hilt in his eye-socket.

They hit the slimy wet concrete together.

Dropping to one knee, Acél scanned the rest of the people around her, immediately assessing that none was a threat as they began to splash in panic through the rain and away from the scene. The mark was stumbling around erratically, not enough comprehension of the situation to realise he should be running with them. She rose and walked towards him. Now,' she said. 'Come.' And, taking him roughly by the arm, led the weakened man away.

Boyling and Windcott caught up with them behind the A-train terminus. Acél was cleaning her knife on a strip of the mark's overcoat; Oleson, having left the bar by a back way, had arrived moments before them. The body of the mark was lying in the gravel at their feet, the pool spreading out beneath it obviously blood but

bleached yellow by the overhead sodium lighting. Oleson hadn't lied: Preston R Antrim had owned the Purpura Pawn for the rest of his life.

'Excellent work as ever, Acél,' Oleson was saying.

'Yes,' blustered Boyling, 'spot on, fantastic job.' Damn, he'd wanted to be the first to congratulate her.

'Not problem. Was easy. Soft neck.'

'Yes, well.' Boyling knew that Oleson never liked this bit and could see it on his face now. He was looking at the mark's body in the dim light: it was lying quite naturally, face down. You could almost believe he'd just tripped having drunk too much. If it hadn't been for the blood, of course.

Acél tossed Oleson the artefact. 'No any damage,' she said.

Oleson didn't bother to inspect it, just smiled at her. Was that pride? 'Pigskin,' he said, now speaking to Boyling and Windcott. 'Always use pigskin for the reveal if the item is small enough. And always do it in such a way that suggests you're holding either an open palmful of explosive or conclusive proof of the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth.'

Boyling nodded attentively; Windcott's body language said he'd heard it all before. The rain got a little colder.

'Right,' Oleson continued, 'split up. Acél.' The old man moved around awkwardly to hand her a small but bulky package he'd produced from under his coat. 'Keep hold of the cash. We'll meet -'

'Hey, how come it's always her who's holding?' It was Windcott who'd interrupted.

'Because I trust her,' Oleson said simply, not looking at his newest apprentice, instead forcing his eyes back to the corpse; to the price of their success. Boyling tried to emulate his mentor but still, after six years, had to turn away before Oleson did. 'We'll meet at the usual place tomorrow afternoon and divvy up then. If we're lucky we should be able to sell this little beauty at least twice more before it gets too hot.' But there was no passion in his voice. There would be tomorrow but not now.

With nothing more to be said, Acél walked off, back towards the street. Boyling hesitated for a moment then, hoping it looked as though he'd chosen a direction at random, went after her.

'You shouldn't trust people just like that, you know,' said Windcott to break the silence. When Oleson finally looked up from the body he fixed his eyes directly on those of his apprentice. Windcott's eyes darted away.

'Don't worry. I don't trust everyone.' And with that he turned and walked off slowly, parallel to the tracks. Windcott shuddered despite himself and forced a laugh to shrug it off. 'You'll get yours, old man, just you see if you don't. And soon,' he muttered to himself as he stepped out of the yellow lamplight and into the night.

And Preston R Antrim was left alone with his fading dreams of fallen empires.

The anterior rooms to the offices of Matthew Barrister were plush and inviting, just what you'd have expected of the civil service in this, if not any other, century. Thick ochre carpet sat under the burgundy-leather upholstered armchairs this side of the deep mahogany desk. On the other side – behind a discreet computer monitor and a broad pad of blotting paper (just for effect) – sat an ageing secretary, her dress and complexion ruddy, seemingly to match the decor rather than from any reason of age or poor health. Behind her, heavy mauve curtains framed floor-to-ceiling windows but at this height all that could be seen of the outside world was the dispersing early morning cloud. They were rooms designed to instil calm and a sense of place, a sense that great times had gone before and by extension would come again. Unfortunately they also thereby inferred that the current times in which they existed were not the best at all.

Irving Braxiatel, arms crossed before him, stood proprietorially in the middle of them. He coughed once gently and spoke. 'Good morning.'

The secretary gave a start. 'I'm sorry, sir, I didn't hear you arrive. I do beg your pardon.'

'Never mind, my dear,' began Braxiatel, moving towards her, suddenly animated, 'I'm told I have a habit of creeping up on people. It's something, I fear, that cannot be helped.' He wore an immaculate charcoal-grey suit and a collarless white shirt with diamond studs at the cuffs. On his lapel was pinned, almost inconspicuously, a small, exotic yellow bloom.

'You have an appointment of course.'

'Of course. Irving Braxiatel. To see Matthew Barrister. I believe I'm pencilled in for nine.'

'Yes. Indeed you are. Well, Mr Braxiatel if you'd like to take a seat, I'm afraid the Minister is currently engaged.'

Braxiatel inclined his head slightly, frowning in polite inquiry. 'Really? How strange. I was led to believe I occupied the Minister's first appointment of the day.'

'Oh you do, sir, you do, but this is...' Her tone became hushed and she looked – rather redundantly but more, one suspects, because some things are simply expected by the universe – behind her before continuing. 'It's not an official engagement, if you see what I mean.' Her bun of plum-coloured hair bobbed excitedly.

Braxiatel didn't and said so.

The secretary mouthed the word police, then nodded sagely and returned to her discreet screen.

As if on cue, the solid oak door to the interior office opened and two men emerged. The first was perhaps in his late forties, tall but with a slight stoop that could have suggested an inferiority complex had the heavy unshaven jowls and watery eyes not pointed towards his having worked through the night. He was obviously leading the second figure but allowed the sense of being ushered for appearance's sake. This first figure – apparently the 'police' – Braxiatel didn't know. The man that followed was Matthew Barrister.

'Brax! Oh thank God you're here, I was – I mean I – ahhh...' He'd quite forgotten himself, pushing past the policeman at the first sight of his friend. It was evidently something he wished he hadn't done.

'Matthew. So good to see you again after all this time,' said Braxiatel, perhaps to cover his friend's embarrassment. 'Or should I be referring to you as Minister these days, hm?'

Despite his apparent nervousness, the Minister nevertheless managed to good-humouredly pshaw away the suggestion and took Braxiatel's hand in both of his. He was an anxious-looking man and given to such exaggerated gestures. Younger, smaller and rounder than the policeman, he now gave the impression of being a child caught between two older boys who wouldn't give him his ball back.

'I'll be in touch then, Mr Barrister,' said the policeman, looking over the Minister's shoulder at Braxiatel but not making any sign of moving. Braxiatel held his gaze easily.

'Yes. Yes of course. Oh, sorry. Irving Braxiatel this is Detective Inspector Braughtigan.'

'Detective Sergeant,' Braughtigan corrected.

'Pleased to make your acquaintance.'

'Right back at ya.'

Neither man offered the other his hand.

'Will you be staying long in the city, Mr Braxiatel?'

'What makes you assume I don't live here, Inspector?'

'Detective Sergeant. Size, Mr Braxiatel. Size makes me think you don't live here. The size of those rocks on your wrists. I know everyone from the city limits to the spaceport, overcity and under, who can afford shirt-ends like that and I don't know you. And then there's the size of Mr Barrister's relief to see you. As though he hadn't been sure you'd come. Because you'd have to have come from some distance.'

'Well, congratulations. A rather simple, if not to say tenuous, deduction, but congratulations in any case.'

There was a pause. The Minister cleared his throat quietly and uncomfortably. The secretary demonstrably minded her own business.

Neither Braughtigan nor Braxiatel took their eyes off one another.

'And will you be staying long in the city, Mr Braxiatel?' the

policeman repeated, with no change in tone from when he'd asked it before.

'I can't say I've decided yet. It rather depends on the reasons I've come here for, wouldn't you say? May I ask your business with my friend?'

'Why? Do you think it may have a connection with your trip here?'

'Just curious, Mr Braughtigan. Just curious.'

Braughtigan's eyes narrowed. 'Not for me to say, Mr Braxiatel. You'd better take that up with the Minister here.'

'Oh there's nothing of any embarrassment going on here, Brax,' chirruped Matthew. His forehead was glistening with sweat and his cheeks burned red.

'There's simply been a... an art theft and the Ser... Detective Sergeant was asking my professional advice as to where it may turn up. Which collectors may be interested and so forth.'

'The Purpura Pawn. Ever heard of it?' asked Braughtigan.

"The Purpura Pawn". Hmm. No, can't say that I have,' Braxiatel replied quietly, as though not giving the question any real consideration.

Braughtigan stepped past the Minister. Stooped as he was, he actually stood a fraction taller than Braxiatel.

'Are you a collector, Mr Braxiatel?'

'What on Earth can you be suggesting, Inspector?'

'Detective Sergeant. I'm not suggesting anything, Mr Braxiatel, simply asking if you are a collector. You look to me like you're a collector.'

'Ah, so you don't suspect my friend here of colluding with thieves. Nor that I could be one such thief myself. Even though you've only just met me. I see. Your tone, I thought, indicated otherwise. My mistake.'

'No one can ever be above suspicion, sir, I'm sure you can appreciate that.'

Braxiatel spread his arms slightly to indicate the room. 'Detective Sergeant, do not these surroundings bear the mark of a successful man? Would such a man collude with... now can I find a term you would perhaps use yourself? Ah yes, "scum". Would such a man collude with "scum", regardless of whether or not you believe me to be such?'

The Minister tried to inconspicuously wipe his brow, blinking rapidly; Braughtigan looked about him casually whilst still endeavouring to keep his eyes on Braxiatel.

'Well they would,' he commented, 'if they were occupied by – how would you perhaps phrase it? – an "entrepreneur" of some kind. I'd agree with you. But this is a government building, you see sir, and the

rooms reflect the position rather than the man.' At this he glanced significantly down at the Minister who in turn indicated that the insult was of no consequence, that Braughtigan should please feel free to continue in the same vein. He did so. 'They say one of two things rises to the top in this city, Mr Braxiatel. And I always like to know exactly which one it is that I'm stirring into my coffee.'

'Did you hear that, Matthew? I rather think that's grounds for defamation of character, don't you?'

The Minister did some more pshawing. 'Oh, I'm sure nothing was meant by it. Only doing his job and all that.'

Braughtigan suddenly turned on his heel, making for the door. 'Thank you for your help, Minister. I'll be in touch.' He moved incongruously through the anteroom and was gone, leaving an uncomfortable incompleteness in the air, like an ellipsis on a page.

Braxiatel heard his friend's voice wavering at his shoulder. 'Now then. You'll take a coffee with me, won't you?'

Braxiatel considered for a moment, looking after the policeman. 'Despite Mr Braughtigan's unfortunate allusion, Matthew, yes, I rather think I will.'

Two

The one thing that people who have visited the Braxiatel Collection are keen to get across to people who haven't – apart from the fundamental point that they're evidently more important because they've received an invitation and their interlocutors haven't – is its size. The size, that is, of both the Collection and the planetoid itself. For, rather transcendently, the one is huge while the other is small. Relatively speaking. A favoured observation that the more excitable of invited academic guests like to reiterate at dinner tables galaxies over is the fact that you can spend far more time – far far more time – walking around the interior of the five-storey manor house alone than it would take you to circumnavigate the entire terraformed landmass. Even if you didn't stick to the paths. There is a game among visiting undergraduates. It involves watching a certain twentieth-century 'movie' – presented on its original celluloid through a half-millennium-old steel projector – about two drunken out of work actors. Each time the characters take a drink the undergraduates have to drink also. Then at the end of the film – after respectfully slurred empathies, for it has quite a sad *dénouement* – the undergraduates split into two groups. One group has to collect one – just one – information leaflet from each display room in the mansion before the other group can run from its entrance to the Grand Trianon on the opposite hemisphere – and how they love saying that: 'We ran to the other *hemisphere*, dude!' – and back round. Both groups have to continuously quote the film. The game is said, perhaps apocryphally so, to have been invented by a certain resident archaeology professor but it's the kind of thing she'll only admit to if you buy her a drink, or flatter the buggery out of her by quoting from either of her published texts or even by expounding on the beauty/cleverness/existence of her young son. Less discreet and perhaps more imaginative story tellers also speak of times when this archaeology professor and her husband/ex-husband take part themselves – on opposing teams, of course – but such tales are not generally believed.

Regardless of whether she invented the game or not, she's certainly been known to encourage it, recently even more so because bad things have been happening on the Collection. Bad things. Things have been damaged. Broken. The construction programme has been more intensive in recent months, she says, than it had been when she arrived there five-and-a-half years previously. No, the place needed livening up, brightening, colouring. And if that colour had to come from the insides of an undergraduate's booze-sodden belly then so be it.

The person who really knew about the comparative intensity of the reconstruction work was Adrian Wall. He'd been there at the beginning and had led the teams during the recent... redevelopment. He and the other Killorans – a race, in human terms, somewhat canine, perhaps even lycanthropic, in appearance, the shortest of them standing an imposing seven feet tall – had almost got things back to normal now. They were a curious race. At some point in their future or past they would become or had been one of the most genocidal peoples with access to space travel, by any galaxy's top ten standard, but now they seemed content enough to mingle with other races, to learn and to help to build. True their formidable appearance did prejudice them on many worlds and truth be told their barks weren't worse than their bites – the screams of the male infants of the species notwithstanding – but they did tend these days to ask questions first and bite later.

And asking questions was exactly what Adrian Wall was doing right now. Coincidentally, biting was something he'd be feeling like doing very shortly.

'Bev,' he began with a low growl that suppressed a good deal, though not all, of his irritation. 'When exactly were you thinking of letting me in on the whole story?' He stopped walking to reinforce his point, a trick Benny had played on him in the past, but it didn't work with Bev. Now that the liner's passengers had been cleared by I D (Immigration and Decontamination) there was apparently no holding her back and she was keeping up with the tide of tourists, virtually indistinguishable among them. 'Bev!' But she'd disappeared in the excited crush of legal and virus-free aliens.

He caught up with her on the other side of the revolving airlock, in the lattice-framed plastiglass walkway that led to the body of the orbiting spacedock. Most of the others had scurried off but Bev was standing to one side looking at the Earth, an Earth that appeared to both squat beneath and loom above them, so close were they and so large it *seemed*. Adrian, despite his anger, found it hard not to be sidetracked by its beauty, its deep blues and passionate greens, the swirling white cloud cover almost but not quite masking the sheer size of the oceans and continents so that you had to guess and inevitably make them larger and more majestic in your mind. It looked so clean, so pure, and it was quite something to see from orbit when you'd lived the last few years on a rock whose circumference could be used as a half-marathon running circuit.

So this was it, then. This was where *she* came from...

No, Adrian growled to himself, the anger resurfacing. Enough of that.

'Oi, Tarrant,' he rumbled, fuse burnt down, temper bristling his fur

like static electricity. He strode over to her and spun her round roughly. 'Why have you dragged me all the way here? You haven't told me everything, have you? I'm not stupid and I don't like being messed around.'

'Don't like being messed around by *some* people, you mean,' quipped Bev with a grin. 'From what I'm told you're quite happy when it's being liberally dished out by certain others.'

'Leave Benny out of this. I don't want to think about that and I –'

'Hey, relax, Adrian. Seriously. I'm only kidding around.' She reached out and her fingers brushed against his huge forearm before he pulled back. Evidently they still didn't know each other well enough for this kind of banter to be harmless; or was it because Benny could never, really, be left out of anything as far as Adrian was concerned? 'Christ it's so easy. You Killorans are so bloody touchy. I'd've thought something your size could afford to take one or two on the chin.'

'Yeah,' he murmured deeply, abashed. 'Well.'

There was an uncomfortable pause, the type that always crops up sooner or later when people who don't know each other that well are left together. They both gazed at the planet before them.

'You haven't been to Earth before, have you Adrian?' Bev ventured. Adrian placed a clawed hand almost reverently on the plastiglass and just continued to stare. After another silence he began to say something but then thought better of it. He didn't know Bev that well. They'd been through some horrific experiences together but no, he didn't know her well enough to tell her he'd always imagined that when he first set foot on Earth it would have been with his wife on his arm and his son riding high on his shoulder. Adrian stared at the blues and greens and swirling whites.

'Anyway,' said Bev eventually to break the tension, 'I'm trying to be inconspicuous; so let's you and I do the touristy thing, okay?'

Adrian turned his head slowly, curiosity getting the better of him. "Inconspicuous"? What's going on, Bev? You told me you needed help with an ex-boyfriend that might've got rowdy.'

'Ah, yes, I did say that, didn't I,' she said looking innocently about her and biting her lip. 'Sorry, Adrian. Appealing to your chivalrous side. But I didn't think you'd've come if I'd told you the truth. How did you know there was something fishy going on?'

'Well, I'm no great romancer,' he said introspectively, facing the planet once again, 'so perhaps I shouldn't judge by my own standards, but I tend to be able to remember the names of my exes.'

'Yeah, I did mess that up a bit, didn't I.'

'Why have we come to Earth, Bev?'

'Shall we walk on? We should probably try and catch up with the

crowd for cover.'

'Why have we come to Earth, Miss Tarrant?'

'Okay, okay, I'll tell you, yeah?' She paused, perhaps hoping she'd already said enough to appease him but a movement from Adrian told her otherwise and she just spat it out.

'I'm collecting something for Brax.'

It was right about then that Adrian Wall really felt like biting something.

Matthew Barrister's office was enormous and furnished in sympathy with the style of the reception area. He knew, however, that it wouldn't be to Braxiatel's taste: too gaudy, too inauthentic. Braxiatel had never especially been one for organising his collection in strict eras, dynasties, or even cultures, but this office had been arranged for effect and it was the affectation that he'd object to. He would never say anything of course, he was too polite for that, but he didn't have to: it was, as they used to say before digitalisation had made pens and other such implements virtually obsolete save for the bizarre practice of keeping old fashioned diaries and journals, written all over his face.

Braxiatel had seated himself in a deep leather-upholstered armchair facing a desk of even greater proportions than the secretary's. The Minister, although fussing about the room, seemed to have calmed down a little; at least he was sweating less now as he served Braxiatel his coffee.

'Is that why you asked me to come here, Matthew, to Earth? Because you're in trouble with the police,' Brax asked as he accepted the coffee, taking up a silver spoon to stir in the sugar. His tone implied that, if so, it would be but a matter of moments – a phone call here, a word in an ear there – and everything would go away.

Matthew now visibly relaxed. He placed his coffee on the edge of the desk and pulled round to the side his own, less exuberant chair, so as to be closer to his friend. He reached out both hands and clasped them around Braxiatel's forearm, slopping the older man's coffee into its saucer and almost knocking his own to the floor.

'Oh Brax, I can't tell you what it means to me to have you here. I've been so... frightened.'

'Come now, Matthew, it can't be that bad,' began Braxiatel, subtly extricating himself and setting down the coffee out of harm's way. 'Now tell me: why was that obnoxious policeman here and what exactly is it that you have been frightened of?'

Matthew let out a long breath as though to steady himself before beginning. 'Apparently there's been a murder and –'

'Surely they don't suspect you.'

'No no nothing like that. Although I think Braughtigan... Look, I'm

getting ahead of myself. It's all so ridiculous, you see. It's like this: a Governor chap named Morton has been murdered. He...' The Minister broke off because Braxiatel was now staring intently at the desk, tapping his upper lip with a finger. 'Do you know him?'

'Morton, Morton. The name is ringing a faint bell.' He paused in thought a moment then suddenly made a gesture, a dismissive flourish of the hand, to indicate it would come to him if it were important and that Matthew should continue.

'Well this poor fellow was murdered, you see. In a hotel room, I believe. Anyway, he was quite a high up sort of bod; about to bring an end to an uprising or a civil war or something. I did look it up but I can't quite remember now. So he's this big cheese sort of a fellow and now he's dead.'

'Do they know who murdered him? Have they caught someone?'

'Yes but he escaped you see.'

Braxiatel actually lurched forwards at the Minister's words, clutching at both arms of his chair. 'He what? Escaped? How on Earth could he have escaped?'

The Minister laughed nervously, thinking that had Braxiatel been sipping his coffee just then he would have sprayed it all over him. 'Steady on old thing, it's okay, justice is done and all that. That's why Braughtigan was here again this morning. Not to tell me he'd escaped, no I knew that. But he's been recaptured. They've got him, you see. Crept up on him during a holiday with his girlfriend or something, I think. Probably bought her; rough type no doubt.'

Braxiatel, sitting back slowly, was lost in thought, not listening. Finally, however, something of what Matthew had been saying seemed to filter through to him. 'Hm? Oh I don't think we need assume that, do we? She could have just got in with the wrong sort. Ah-ha!' He clapped his hands suddenly, making the Minister jump as he'd been reaching for his coffee. 'Got it. Morton. He's out in the... the Domus system, isn't he? I think I read something.'

'He was.'

'Oh yes, of course. Quite. Governor Mark Morton. But that still doesn't explain your involvement, Matthew,' Braxiatel added. 'Why would Braughtigan come to you about this?'

'Ah right, well, you see, it seems that this low-life, wastrel, murdering-type – I forget his name; I don't believe it's been released to the public but Braughtigan did tell me; in any case this thug stole something from the hotel.' He'd pushed his chair back now and was stretching across his desk to look through a thin file of printouts.

'A towel? Mint chocolate?'

'No, this is serious, Brax,' Matthew insisted, riffling the pages, but he couldn't help thinking that a part of his friend's attention had

drifted away from the subject. 'It was an artefact, you see. The Purpura Pawn,' he said, seating himself again. 'Mean anything to you, Brax?'

'Never heard of it before your policeman friend mentioned it earlier.'

'Really? Thought it would've been right up your street or down your alley or whatever. Very old, apparently.' His eyes scanned the page in front of him. 'War memento of some description I think Braughtigan said.'

'Oh, I'm sure I've heard something about it somewhere along the way.'

'Right,' Matthew laughed, returning the page to the desk. 'I suppose if you'd wanted it you'd have it by now, wouldn't you.'

'Possibly, possibly,' Braxiatel paused, an almost vacant look on his face now as though he were contemplating the unfathomable. 'But look,' he went on, patiently, refocusing. 'Why, exactly, did Braughtigan want to talk to you?'

The Minister held up both hands in admonition. 'Sorry, Brax. Yes. Well, you see it's just the sort of thing my department here deals with. Our bread and butter, you might say.'

'Theft? Really? I don't recall you being involved with that side of things.'

'No no no. The theft's not the thing here for me. Well...' The Minister lapsed into a brief introspective silence but almost as quickly snapped out of it again. 'No. It's the artefact, you see. They think we may be able to identify any possible collectors. If the thieves want to sell it. That's why Braughtigan wanted to talk to someone at the AAA.'

'Of course, of course. AAA. The Acquisition of Alien Artefacts department. How remiss of me, I'd quite forgotten. And you're responsible of course for the registration and documentation of everything.'

'That's me. Braughtigan, you see, wants to make sure the Purpura Pawn wasn't sold beforehand to a collector on Earth, and wants to know if it was actually in the room at the time of the murder as they claim.'

'They?'

'Oh the Aequums. Natives of Aequitas. They're -'

'Yes, well I don't think we need go into all that,' said Braxiatel curtly, crossing his legs. 'What have you been able to tell this Braughtigan?'

'Well, I have no record of it having been sold or acquired legally. Technically it's a heritage piece, owned by the people. But the police of course want a list of any collectors I may know of who have ever shown an interest in it or whom I may think would be interested.'

‘Yet you didn’t give them my name.’

The Minister smiled briefly, uncertainly. His nervousness seemed to have returned suddenly and when he lifted his coffee the cup rattled slightly on the saucer. ‘Well, no,’ he confessed, not looking at his friend. ‘I didn’t want to get you involved.’ He stood up awkwardly and took the dozen or so steps to the window. Looking out at the city below and keeping his back to Braxiatel he seemed to be preparing himself to tell the whole story. ‘I may be into this a little deeper than I’ve indicated, you see, and I rather think I need your help to get me out of it.’

‘So why can’t Braxiatel come to Earth and pick this Purple Prawn thing up for himself?’ snarled Adrian.

‘Have you not been listening to me? Brax doesn’t know about the Purpura Pawn. That’s my job: to dig stuff up for him around the galaxies.’

‘Thought you were his PA these days.’

‘Well, I am, but in this case PA stands for Purloiner of Artefacts, okay?’

‘You’re just his bloody lapdog.’

Bev suddenly let out a sharp burst of incredulous laughter as though to say, Look who’s calling whom a dog, and instantly regretted it. They’d moved into a large reception area lined with giftshops; the genuine tourists seemed to have never seen shops before and were taking the opportunity to buy as many globes, die-cast liners and toiletry products as humanly – or otherwise possible. There were another two hours to wait before the next shuttle service down to the surface and Bev and Adrian had decided to spend the time in a bar. Unfortunately though, the spacedock didn’t seem to have an alcohol licence and so they had been forced to order some rather exuberant carbonated drinks which fizzed at them almost angrily. ‘What I mean,’ Bev continued lamely, trying to cover her last reaction, ‘is that you do stuff for Braxiatel too. We all do.’

‘I’m not a delivery boy, Bev, I’m a builder. Why am I here?’

Bev took a sip of her volatile pop. ‘Okay. Sometimes Brax asks me to pick things up for him, right? Well, when I’m not doing that I’ve got this sort of unofficial mandate to, well, as I say, dig stuff up. I think Jason used to do something similar but these days Brax seems to have passed the responsibility on to me.’

‘Taking over the reigns from Jason Kane? Are you sure you know what you’re involved with, Bev?’ The growl was now tinged with concern.

‘Yes, yes, I’m a big girl thank you, Adrian.’

‘But not big enough, eh? Otherwise you wouldn’t have tricked me

into coming along.'

Bev considered taking umbrage at that, but he was right so why bother?

'I heard that a man named Oleson was offering a really special piece here on Earth. I asked around and found out it was called the Purpura Pawn. It sounded like something Brax would want, all full of historical significance and all that, so I've come after it.'

'And this Oleson is a thief.'

'Of course he's a bloody thief. Sorry. Yes, he's a thief. He nicked it off some politician and I'm going to buy it for Brax. The thing is... Well, I've set up a meeting with Oleson. Couldn't find out much about him but then again I didn't expect to be able to. It's all very well being famous within your own circles but when thieves become household names they may as well pack up their swag bags. But he's highly respected in his field. Some say he's the best.'

'I'm sure that counts for something.'

'But the thing that concerned me,' Bev continued, ignoring the sarcasm, 'is that he has a woman called Acél attached to his outfit. I may not have been able to learn much about Oleson beyond the usual hype but I've certainly heard about her before. She's his muscle.'

'Killing machine, I take it.'

'Pretty much.'

Adrian removed the elaborate straw from his drink. 'So you thought that rather than giving her the chance of killing only you, you'd bring me along to offer her a choice of target. Thanks. I take it you did tell Mr Braxiatel where you – where *we* – were going?'

Bev seemed suddenly interested in the surroundings of the bar. 'Didn't want to disturb him,' she said to the room in general. 'In any case Ms Jones told me he was indisposed so I left it at that. No. I just want to get down there, get it sorted and get it back to him on the Collection.'

Adrian considered his soft drink then stood, pushing it towards Bev. 'Here,' he said, 'you have this. You'll need the sugar for all the running for our lives we're bound to be doing later.'

'Where are you going?' Bev half rose from her seat but Adrian had already moved off and was weaving between the crowded tables and back out onto the main concourse. He turned and, perhaps aware that he wasn't actually drawing any attention in the multi-species spacedock – and perhaps finding himself a little, if irrationally, annoyed by this – he roared an answer.

'Shopping. If I'm about to be killed by some famous thief's hired mercenary I think I'd like to send my son a postcard and a teddy bear first.'

And with that he was gone.

‘Money.’

‘Money.’

‘You asked me to leave the Collection and come all this way just to ask me for a *loan*? Without wishing to sound ostentatious, Matthew, it’s yours. I’ll encode a funds-transfer credit chip here and now. But couldn’t you have phoned?’

‘Well. It seemed... politer this way. And in any case,’ he continued in a lower tone, ‘I suspect the sum involved is rather more than you may anticipate.’

Braxiatel rose easily from the armchair, despite its depth and clinging comfort, and joined Matthew at the window. The world went on below them. Just on the horizon he could make out the shuttle terminus that, had he arrived by shuttle from the orbiting spacedock, he would have come through. He placed an arm uncharacteristically around his friend’s shoulder. ‘You’re still gambling, then.’

‘Yes,’ said Matthew simply. ‘But it’s not as straightforward as that. If it were simply a question of the monies owed... Well, I’ve lived with that Damoclean Sword over my head most of my life, why start crying to mater about it now? It’s certainly been this way since you’ve known me. No, I’m being... blackmailed.’

Braxiatel seemed curious. ‘Blackmailed?’ He shifted round so that the two men now stood face to face. ‘To what end?’

‘That’s just it: I don’t know. I mean I haven’t been asked to do anything yet.’ Braxiatel sighed. ‘I don’t think I understand quite, Matthew.’

‘Neither do I. Look.’ The Minister moved to his desk and gathered to him across the printed pages the two coffee cups and a solid glass paperweight. ‘This is me, okay?’ and he slid one of the coffee cups into a prominent position before him. Standing at his shoulder, Braxiatel looked between it and his friend with what was almost certainly scepticism. ‘Now this,’ Matthew continued, pulling the other coffee cup closer, ‘is my blackmailer.’

‘Does he have a name?’

‘Ah, well, I’m coming to that now, you see. He contacted me first about a month ago and said that if I did not do him a favour he would make my gambling debts known throughout the civil service and I’d be finished.’

‘But he didn’t specify as to what the favour would be.’

‘Right. But later I thought I’d deduced that myself, you know, because he told me to call him Purpurin. You see it was a little time after that when Braughtigan first approached me.’

‘Very apt,’ commented Braxiatel indicating the paperweight as Matthew moved it beside the first coffee cup. ‘Thick yet completely transparent.’

‘Oh yes,’ the Minister laughed after only the slightest pause for thought. ‘Get it. Very good. Well the point is this Braughtigan fellow asked me an awful lot of questions about the artefact stolen during the murder of Mark Morton: the Purpura Pawn. That’s when I suspect he first began to have doubts about me because I’m afraid that the connection I made between the two names did somewhat show in my mannerisms. Purpurin. Purpura Pawn. It’s hardly a commonly used word. Well that’s by-the-by and all done now. But the next time Purpurin contacted me I put it to him that he must want me to get this Purpura Pawn for him. And do you know what the fellow said?’

Braxiatel went for the obvious answer. “‘Yes’?”

‘No,’ exclaimed Matthew. ‘I’d been all ready to refuse him on moral grounds, long eloquent speech and all that, but he just laughed and told me that he already had the Purpura Pawn himself. So you see... you see...’

‘You think your blackmailer, Purpurin, is the same man that killed Mark Morton.’

‘Precisely.’

Braxiatel seemed to ponder this for a moment. ‘Blackmailed by a killer who’s yet to make any actual blackmail demands. Missing out one of the fundamental principles there, wouldn’t you have said?’

‘Well indeed. He just keeps telling me I’ll find out soon enough. In the meantime I’m caught between a rock and a hard place.’ He indicated the cups and paperweight.

Braxiatel took off one of his diamond cufflinks, leaned across and placed it gently into the first – now empty – coffee cup.

‘Unless I do something about it,’ he said.

Matthew smiled coyly. ‘You’d need to put in one or two more of those I’m afraid. But, yes. That would remove my motive. If I have no debt, Purpurin has nothing “on me” as they say. And Braughtigan wouldn’t have a motive to connect me to Purpurin or to any collectors who wanted the Purpura Pawn.’

Braxiatel smiled at his friend’s naivety. ‘Even rich people steal, you know,’ he said.

The Minister retrieved the cufflink and handed it back to Braxiatel, but if he’d wanted to continue the conversation he didn’t get the chance to do so just then because Braxiatel’s personal communicator buzzed from deep inside the expensive charcoal-grey suit. Braxiatel excused himself, took out the slim device – which Matthew noted didn’t conform to any brand or industry standard he knew of– and glanced at the caller ID.

‘Ah,’ he said succinctly. ‘I’m afraid, Matthew, that I shall have to take this. Would you excuse me just a moment?’ The Minister windmilled his arms inexplicably but in a manner that presumably

was intended to indicate willing acquiescence and left the office.

Braxiatel watched Matthew leave, and then connected the call.

‘Benny. What can I do for you?’

The voice of Professor Bernice Summerfield came to him with crystal clarity.

‘Brax. Something’s happened. I need you to do some checking around for me. I’d do it myself but I rather doubt my ability compared to yours in the string-pulling department.’

‘It sounds serious.’

‘It could be. Then again this kind of thing happens to my ex-husband a lot.’

‘Jason? Is he okay?’

‘No. I don’t think he is. Look Brax, much as I hate to be one of those people who ask that question: where are you?’

‘Listen, Bernice. It’s a little inconvenient for me to speak just at the moment. Could I call you back in a, oh, no more than a minute or two?’

‘What? Make a sentence out of these words, Brax: damsel-in-distress-the-other-end-of-this-line-on-there’s-a.’

‘We’ll talk again in a moment, I promise.’

‘Brax? Braxiatel. Okay so “damsel” is pushing it more than a tad these days but, Goddess, I swear if you hang up on me you smug, selfish bast–’

Braxiatel cut the connection and stood in silent contemplation for more than a minute, unmoving, not even replacing his percomm.

Then he strode purposefully towards the office doors.

In the anteroom, he smiled at Matthew, who was standing behind his secretary making uncomfortable small talk but, perhaps registering the seriousness on his friend’s face, came directly over to Braxiatel’s side. Braxiatel drew him discreetly away from the plum-coloured PA.

‘Tell me, Matthew,’ he said in a low, preoccupied voice, his eyes directed at the deep-pile carpeting. ‘Honestly. And I’m not saying anything here one way or the other you understand. What would you do if I weren’t to make a loan of the money for you?’

It was a direct question and Braxiatel knew Matthew felt its impact. ‘What would I do?’

‘Yes,’ continued Braxiatel calmly, trying to disguise the impatience in his tone. ‘Would you do whatever it was that this Purpurin asked of you?’

Matthew paused for a second, lips pursed in – What? Concentration? Frustration? Then he raised his head to look Braxiatel in the eye. ‘It would mean the end of me but... well. Blackmail. It’s not the kind of thing one likes to accede to, is it.’

Braxiatel nodded. 'We'll speak tonight. Come to me at eight. I'm staying at the Luxus.'

It wasn't until he was alone in the lift on the way down to the ground floor of the government building that Irving Braxiatel realised he was still holding his percomm. He'd have to call Benny back.

'I do hope you're not planning to cause me any more trouble, Jason Kane,' he sighed to himself. 'For your sake.'

Bev caught up with Adrian in the outbound departures lounge with just twenty minutes to go until they had to board their shuttle and only then because she'd been paged. Apparently she'd been rushing all over the spacedock looking for him for almost an hour, so she approached him now in a sweat and a bad mood.

'Adrian. Why the hell are you paging me to come here? Why didn't you go to the information area, I had you paged twice, you must have heard it.'

'I was busy.'

'Right. Busy sulking. Look, Adrian, I've no idea of the full story between you and Bernice, but you're a bit too big to be moping around feeling sorry for yourself.'

'For your information, Miss Tarrant,' Adrian growled angrily, 'I haven't been sulking or moping,' (he had, however, been feeling sorry for himself, though she didn't need to know that). 'Braxiatel has been in touch. He's on Earth. Benny's in trouble. We're leaving. I bought your ticket. Brax transferred the credit to my chip. I can't get hold of Benny.'

This was clearly too much information in too many short sentences for Bev to take in. 'What?' she managed finally, shaking her head as though to clear it. Then she paused. 'Wait a minute. What are you doing in the outbound departures lounge? We're inbound. Towards Earth.'

'We're not going to Earth, Bev. We're going to help Benny. I told Mr Braxiatel where we are but he agrees with me it's important we go to the Domus system. Now.'

'Why is it important? Wait a minute. Braxiatel is on Earth? Why?'

'How should I know? He didn't say.' Adrian took a deep breath, bracing himself to remember everything he'd been told. 'There's a guy called Morton. A politician. He was killed, assassinated maybe, I don't know. Somehow Jason's been arrested for his murder.'

'Morton?' whispered Bev to herself. 'Where have I heard that name recently?' Then to Adrian she said, 'I need to check something out on the news network. I'll be two minutes, okay?'

But Adrian held her back. 'Bev. I haven't got a choice. If I know Benny she'll do everything she can to help Jason. She loves him. That

means she'll be putting herself in danger and I... I have to...' He fell silent, eyes to the floor.

'What?' asked Bev gently. 'What do you have to do, Adrian?'

Adrian Wall looked at her then, his expression simplicity itself: there was no conflict of emotion, no indecision. 'Protect her,' he said. 'I have to.'

Bev nodded her silent understanding. 'You need a drink,' she said to lighten the mood. 'I'll be two minutes.'

When Bev returned she was carrying two beverages, one of which she handed to Adrian. 'Here,' she said, 'I found something with a kick.'

'Thanks,' he rumbled taking the small plastic cup and drank down the contents in one. Bev waited until he'd crushed the thin vessel and thrown it to a cleaning 'bot that was skimming unobtrusively close by, having anticipated his action. 'Adrian,' she began. 'Listen to me: we have to go to Earth. We're going to Earth.'

'I won't abandon Benny. Certainly not for some cheap ornament.'

'And I wouldn't ask you to. Look, Adrian, the best way to protect Bernice is to uncover exactly what's going on here. I found a reference in the recent news casts. This "ornament" I want to get for Brax: it was stolen when Governor Mark Morton was murdered. And Jason's being framed for it.'

'I don't understand.'

Bev took it slowly. 'Do you think Jason killed Morton?'

'No.' Adrian surprised himself with the directness of his response. And with the fact that he believed it. Benny's ex-husband was – had been – many things but he wasn't a murderer.

'Then whoever did is down there now on Earth trying to sell the artefact they stole from the hotel room while they were doing it.'

She left a pause which Adrian eventually tried to fill. 'But you've already been in contact with the people who've got the artefact,' he reasoned slowly. It was hard going: he'd even started to sweat.

'Right,' Bev concluded flatly. 'Oleson. His gang must have pulled off the job; it would have been Acél who actually killed Morton.' Adrian now seemed at a complete loss; with a head full of concern for Bernice he could hardly begin to think through anything else. It was making him feel dizzy. Bev sighed sympathetically. 'If you leave now,' she proposed, 'you'll be in transit for days. If you come down to Earth with me, we could get the Purpura Pawn – the proof we need to save Jason – we could have it by tomorrow.'

A kind of realisation grew dimly within Adrian. 'Then that's why Braxiatel is down there. He's come here to sort that out and he needs us to go and help Benny. I mean Jason.'

'Or else he's just down there to buy the damn thing himself and

couldn't care less about Jason.'

'You said he didn't know about this pawn thing.'

'Well he obviously does, doesn't he? Or maybe he doesn't, I don't know. Look, Adrian. We have to go down there. Trust me.'

Adrian let out a sharp bark of laughter; it rang strangely in his head. Come to that, everything was ringing strangely in his head. 'Trust you? We spent... We spent...' Adrian faltered, his head pounding now. 'We were on the liner together for... for I-don't-know-how-many days. Yet for most of that time you were locked up in your cabin poncing around on the galactic web.'

'I was trying to get the gen on Oleson,' Bev blurted out defensively. 'That's how I got confirmation that Acél is working for his gang.'

'But we hardly even saw each other. We've never talked.' Adrian inhaled a great lungful of air; it tasted warm and sweet and made his chest feel tight, still he tried to make his point: 'Trust you. I... I don't even know you.'

When Adrian hit the floor of the outbound departures lounge he finally, although he didn't know it, managed to attract the attention he'd been courting earlier.

'Sorry Adrian. I can't do this alone.' Bev checked her timepiece: eight minutes to get to the boarding area for Earth; eight minutes to find a hover porter, explain that her travelling companion had taken too many space-sickness pills and was suffering severe drowsiness. She'd been saving the dose of muscle relaxant for when she inevitably came up against Acél, whatever good it may have done her. No matter, he'd given her no choice.

And in any case she'd been lucky: the narco who'd sold it to her had said the stuff only worked if you mixed it with milk.

Three

It was after midday by the time Windcott finally rolled out of the bar. He hadn't been home since leaving Oleson the night before but he had slept. A little. He had a cramped apartment less than two blocks from the newssheet stand against which he now leaned but he spent most of his life in the bars and alleys of the neighbourhood. It was a rare night that he got back to his own bed, either hooking up with a woman – he knew them all intimately by now – or dozing at a table between rounds with his face among the sticky alcoholic rings. He'd been born here, grown up here, spent most of his adolescence hanging around with the gangs, terrorising the streets and ruling over the condemned shell of the old hypermall; he had never in his life ventured more than five blocks from the basement apartment his parents had rented twenty-seven years ago. He'd always been known in the district, but was more so now because of his association with Oleson's outfit. It had given him a certain amount of kudos, respect by association, and it was this attention that Windcott had recently let go to his head.

'Oi, Windy. You buying or just considering puking?'

Windcott was still resting his head against the thin plasticblock side of the newssheet stand, tentatively getting his lungs used to breathing in air with slightly less carcinogens than he'd been breathing all night. The stationer had meant the remark to be harmless enough but Wincott's response was violent and vitriolic.

He'd drunk more than usual: dutch courage, that's what they used to call it, whatever a dutch was. He remembered a woman called a duchess from an old children's story his sister had read to him; perhaps a dutch was her husband and he needed to be permanently slaughtered to cope with his domestic life. Made sense: Windcott too, after all, had women problems. The meet was on for tonight with the off-world woman; she'd probably be on Earth already, and he still hadn't got the artefact; he should have asked for it last night when Oleson gave Acél the money. Asked for it? Demanded it! *Hey, old man: if she's looking after the cash I'll look after the merchandise, okay? Don't give me any trouble either 'cause I'll just blow ya crukking head clean of ya shoulders, understand? It's about time you did understand. I'm different, yeah? I'm better than all this. People know my name. I don't need you to tell me what to do anymore. I never did. I can make my own plans. I have made my own plans.*

Windcott's pulse rose with the thoughts and his skin prickled hot with anger. He'd show them, oh yes. He'd show them. But to do that he needed the Purpura Pawn.

Dexter Braughtigan's life was a simple one. Sure he had all the usual baggage, who didn't by the time they'd reached fifty? The paunch, the ex-wife, the two kids he saw once in a blue moon; he'd learned to accept the first, to live without the second and... well, relationships with one's kids were complicated things. The younger had moved off-world with her mother and now had a daughter of her own; the elder had long ago decided his father was to blame for everything: from the marriage break-up – which was at least half true – to his failed career – which could possibly have been true. Only time and the quarter of Braughtigan's monthly salary that still went to his son's shrink would tell for sure. Their home had gone with the marriage, which was bad; but then so had most of their friends, which was good because Braughtigan had never liked many of them, even those he'd known before the marriage. 'You don't like my friends, do you,' he'd once accused Michelle. 'You don't like your friends,' she'd retorted, and he'd had to admit she was right. But underneath it all there was this: he was one of the good guys and he had to stop the bad guys. It was the foundation that kept him sane. So he lived alone, ate too much starchy food, drank too much decaffeinated tea and told himself the world – the city? the district? – was a better place on some level because he was still in it. It was a simple philosophy and one which, most days if not all, was pretty easy to believe.

Of course you first had to figure out who the bad guys were, but Detective Sergeant Dexter Braughtigan had always been pretty damn good at that.

'Here's the information you asked for, sir,' said Hopkins, the uniformed man on duty on Braughtigan's floor – the seventeenth – of the Law Enforcement building. They dealt mostly with inter-world larceny up here the lower the floor the closer to home the department's remit – and were quite high-profile. As such, Braughtigan was the black sheep of the department in that he also liked to keep his ear to the ground, the joke being among his colleagues that he should keep his desk down there too if he was really that interested.

Hopkins held out a data cube. When Braughtigan took it, he could tell from the holographic free-space indicator on the side that barely a tenth of its storage capacity had been used.

'This is all we've got on him?' he asked incredulously, stirring another saccharinol into his tea.

'He's one of the good guys, sir,' said Hopkins, using the phrase because he knew the way Braughtigan thought and was hoping to make an impression.

'I've got a good arse for my age, Hopkins, but when I want you to kiss it I'll ask.' Then, feeling he had maybe been a little harsh, he

added, 'I decide who the good guys are. In a nutshell?'

Unfazed by the rebuke – in fact somewhat enjoying the banter – Hopkins pulled up a chair. 'He owns a small planetoid some way out passed Abadron. KS-159, redesignated the Braxiatel Collection. Seems to have turned it into a sort of... warehouse-cum-amusement park for academics. It's actually quite interesting.'

Braughtigan carried on stirring slowly, contemplating the information medium in his other hand. 'If you like that kind of thing. Charges a lot for admission?'

'Invitation only. Students and professors go there to research stuff.' Tasting his tea and grimacing, Braughtigan added another white capsule from its dispenser. 'Any info on where his money comes from?'

Hopkins pulled a face that said, Precious little. 'Well, we haven't actually been able to find any traces of income. We know which banks he keeps his money in,' he added hopefully, 'but of course we won't be able to get a warrant to view his transactions unless we dig something else up on him that would, er, warrant it. His outgoings, on the other hand, are publicly documented. Funding archaeological digs, establishing Chairs in universities, sponsoring galleries and museums.'

'As long as they aren't competition for his Collection.'

Hopkins eyed the data cube in his superior's hand as though trying to mentally retrieve something useful from it; but the only response he could come up with was another negative one. 'It doesn't seem to be a profit-making venture, sir.'

'Different people measure profit in different ways, Hopkins.' Braughtigan twisted the cube between his fingers. 'Maybe the stuff everyone else has is simply stuff this Braxiatel doesn't want. I've met him and you know what I thought? I thought here's a man who gets what he wants; who tells people what he wants and they get it for him.'

'Well according to the computer he's cleaner than a newborn's conscience.'

Braughtigan finally put down the spoon. Raising his eyebrows he turned his head to look at the young duty officer. 'Ever heard of original sin, Hopkins?'

But perhaps that was going too far; after all, all he was basing his opinion on at the moment was the fact that he personally disliked the man. Maybe he was this wonderful academic philanthropist. But he was also a collector and that had been the reason Braughtigan had gone to see Matthew Barrister at AAA in the first place: to establish which, if any, collectors would be likely to want the Purpura Pawn and why. The answer in Braxiatel's case, he felt sure, would be, For The Hell Of It. And Barrister's manner at each of their meetings had

been... edgy; there had to be something behind that. Maybe there was someone behind that. Blackmail? Experience and common sense told Braughtigan never to rule it out.

But who? And why?

Without tasting it he added another saccharinol to his tea. Then flipped the data cube in for good measure.

Oleson sat on a bench in a park in the so-called overcity area of town. He fitted in perfectly here, just as he'd fitted in perfectly in the undercity bar the night before. He was a man with clothes and manner for any occasion and right now he was an office executive come outside to eat a late lunch in the fresh air.

He was seventy-three years old. He'd been in the business for over fifty of those years and by industry standards had been quite a late starter. But he'd been successful, risen to the top, was greatly respected and little known: the perfect combination and it hadn't been easy to achieve. Yet in all that time he'd never killed a man. Never wounded a man, never shot or stabbed anyone. Not personally. Of course his had been the orders – instructions? recommendations? – that had got people killed but he'd never actually raised his own hand in violence. Did that mean he was a violent man or not? In actual fact it probably just made him a coward. But he wasn't seen as such. People had their roles in life, his was simply at the business end of things rather than at the *business* end of things.

His brother had taken the burden for so many years. Anthony had had a gift for it, being a rough, uncompromisingly brutal man. They'd complemented one another well and when Anthony had decided to call it a day, Oleson had come close to jacking it in too. He felt the same way again now. He looked across the park to the gently spurting fountain and up to the early afternoon sun.

What would you do, Anthony? In my position.

Stupid question, brother. I'd kill him.

Yes. You would, wouldn't you.

But seeing as you're trying to imbue my memory with your conscience and engage it in conversation I'll give it another go.

Thank you.

Killing him is an option, though, I'd just like to point out.

I shall bear it in mind. But there's a wider issue here, one that goes beyond him.

Then the way I see it is that you're getting old, losing the love for it all. I lost it too and d'you know what I did?

You got out.

I got out. Never regretted it for a second, although of course that's you making me say that and you've got no idea whether I've actually

been regretting it or not.

Your interjections are kind of defeating the purpose here.

Right. Sure. Well, do you feel it's time to get out?

Oleson fingered the Purpura Pawn in his pocket. His expert fingertips could feel every detail of its carving through the thin expensive silk. I looked at this artefact this morning, Anthony, and it didn't make me happy.

Perhaps it's just a bad piece.

No. It's one of the best. One of the best that –

Have any of the others made you feel this way?

Oleson chose his words carefully. I've had... twinges you might say. Recently. Yes.

Throw it away.

What?

The Purpura Pawn. Throw it away. End all this now. Take it out of your pocket and toss it to that litter 'bot skulking in the bushes. It's just a worthless trinket after all. Get rid of it. Then walk. You could come and find me, wherever it is that I've got to.

Oleson took the Purpura Pawn out of his pocket as he'd been instructed. It was still gently wrapped in its pigskin shroud which he now peeled back. It was a beautiful piece. Sixty-seven point three millimetres high with a base exactly two centimetres in diameter. Made from an aluminosilicate it was turned to perfection in the usual three sections: base, stem and head. The original feldspar was a light, subtle grey colour but from deep within there rose a stippled red-brown pattern – a purpura – said, as Antrim had intoned last night, to be the blood of Primearch Ceatul XVI. It was a beautiful piece. But...

I can't see any passion in your heart, Andrew. There used to be passion there.

No, agreed Oleson. Perhaps I'm starting to think that none of this is worth it. There were times when I could have sat here in the sun and looked at work like this all day. I wouldn't even hear the words if people stopped and spoke to me.

Those times have gone, Andrew. I think you know that.

Yes. I know that. But I can't throw it away. What does that mean?

It seems to me, brother, one way or another, that things are coming to an end.

'Yes,' said Oleson aloud to himself. 'Some things are coming to an end.' He carefully folded the pigskin around the Purpura Pawn and, placing it back in his pocket, stood up from the bench. 'And others are just beginning.' And he knew that his brother had been right all along.

Adrian was coming round and Bev was starting to wish there was something more than a twenty-mill sheet of unbreakable plastiglass

between them. The adjective, she suspected, had yet to be proved in the context of a Killoran male recovering to find he'd been drugged and dragged down to the surface of a strange planet when what he'd really wanted to do was shoot off to the other side of the galaxy and rescue the woman he loved.

Yep, she was in trouble, and the medicentre would soon have to redefine the construction standards of its building.

Windcott let himself into Oleson's apartment without making a sound. He didn't have a key but, well, you didn't grow up around here without learning how to break into a place. They'd rigged up E-LTs as kids. Electronic-Lock Tumblers. Simple devices made from old solid-state tech hybridised with scanning equipment shops used to register barcodes. Some kid stocking shelves at night in one of the hypermall units had figured it out years back; the subsequent nocturnal rash of till thefts had first been put down to ineptitude – the tills were all empty – and then to an adolescent trend, like breaking manufacturer's symbols off the bonnets of old-style combustion engine autos. And now, twenty years on, his old E-LT had worked like a charm. Why the hell hadn't Oleson got some proper security fitted?

But he knew the answer to that: Oleson, ironically, had nothing worth stealing; or at least that was the perception. Windcott looked around him: at the dirty boots on the peeling lino-plast of the stubby hallway; at the coat rack that hung burdened and askew off a stained and damp wall; through the open door to the cramped and gunked kitchen ahead; left down the short corridor to the main living space door; and he smelled the moist ammonia stench that told of cat-litter trays too infrequently emptied. There was no natural light. Despite all his skill and personal wealth, Oleson lived like an undercity pimp. Windcott had been here once before, right at the start when he'd joined the outfit, and if he'd had any respect for the man's reputation in the first place he'd lost it then. He'd been planning this, he realised, from that very first day. He'd been waiting for this – waiting for the right artefact to come along, for the right buyer; waiting for the big one – and his head had cleared enough during the walk here for him to see that messing things up at this stage would be bloody stupid. No: everything was in place: the mark was on her way, the rest of the gang was off-guard after the success of the previous night's job, and his man in the civil service was getting nice and scared, scared enough to do the simple task he'd ask of him when the time came. And on top of all that his old E-LT still bloody worked after all these years. Windcott smiled to himself.

'Something amusing you perhaps, John?'

Windcott leapt with reflexive fright away from the voice and

cracked his head off the coat rack, which proved to be the final encouragement the thing needed to come off the wall completely. His legs began to fold under him but he still had balance enough to turn and see who had spoken as he stumbled backwards towards the living area.

Even though the voice had been male, Windcott realised he'd been expecting to see Acél emerge from the shadows of the kitchen, realised that all this time his subconscious had assumed that she and Oleson were an item. How ridiculous that seemed now – right in this split second of comprehension – especially when the only figure with him in the hall was Oleson himself, bent, white haired and tired looking.

Windcott found himself backed up against the door to the main living area. He used the support it provided to straighten himself and felt his wits returning. Shaking the embarrassment of the shock from his head he took a step confidently back up the hall. He even began to clap his hands slowly and deliberately in sarcastic congratulation.

'Nice trick, Olly. Gave me quite a stir. How long you been waiting in there to pull that one off, then? Ever since I joined your crew?' He stopped clapping and instead laughed aloud. 'Sitting in your kitchen in the dark every night waiting to go boo! And there was me thinking you were having appallingly wonderful things done to you by that bitch of yours.'

Oleson stood his ground as Windcott took another step towards him. 'You still seem greatly amused by something, John. What would that be, exactly?' he asked levelly.

If the line had been intended to halt the younger man's approach it achieved its aim, Windcott stopping to laugh harder. He could just make out the white-stubbled chin moving in the dim light as Oleson spoke. It seemed almost dusty as though the man were some kind of mummified parody of a human being. He's a relic himself, Windcott thought. Ha!

'Oh, Olly. You kill me, you really do.'

'Yes,' came the flat reply. 'I'm rather afraid I have to.'

The shot was hardly audible and Windcott had time to think, Hey: laser; expensive piece of hardware by the sounds of it, before he joined the dead coat rack on the uneven floor.

Something was licking Windcott's face and as much as he'd fantasised about the moment in the past, right now he hoped it wasn't Acél because whatever it was its breath stank of rotted fish and sweaty arse cracks. He tried to bat it away but when he lifted his arm above him the movement hurt like hell and something thick and sticky splashed down onto his face. And that made the rasping little tongue lick all the

more.

Then he heard Oleson's voice again and got the sense that he was joining it mid-soliloquy.

'You've gone too far, John.'

Oleson had moved forwards, not really into the light but at least a little out of the shadows.

'You'll jeopardise everything. And everyone. Boyling deserves better than this.'

Windcott threw the cat off him with his other hand in a wide, sweeping motion. The animal complained indignantly and darted off through Oleson's legs and into the kitchen. Then Windcott seemed to realise what had happened.

'Christ Almighty! You bastard! You shot me in the bastard hand!'

'I know why you came here tonight, John,' said Oleson, the calmness of his voice contrasting sharply with the panic and confusion in Windcott's. 'But you've failed. Understand? Do you understand that?'

'Christ! Why would you shoot me in the bastard hand?' wailed Windcott, his left hand holding his right tightly at the wrist to slow the loss of blood. No.

No, I get it,' he added hastily. 'I get it, listen: I deserve it, I get the point: tools of the trade right? You're telling me I'll never work in the business again. I get it. Yeah? Teach me a lesson, eh? Great. I've learned it, Teach, yeah?'

Oleson was now standing over him. 'I know everything, John. I know that you came here tonight for the Purpura Pawn.'

'I don't know what you mean,' blurted Windcott indignantly, but it wasn't convincing.

'I know that you're planning to sell it to a woman named Bev Tarrant. Incidentally, did you know she works for Irving Braxiatel?' Windcott didn't answer, just squirmed in pain some more. 'No. I don't suppose you've even heard of him, have you? No reason why you should have. Different circles. And I also know about your government man. Not quite sure what part he was to play in your grand scheme but I suspect he was a replacement for Acél's role? Yes: you wanted to get the Pawn back after selling it and he'd do it for you somehow, that's right isn't it? I would question whether or not you had the stomach for killing her but I know that you have. Unlike me. Or at least that's what I thought. You thought you could do without all of us. Strike out on your own.'

How the hell did Oleson know all this? He'd underestimated the old man, misjudged him completely. He looked like the bow-out-gracefully type, didn't he? The type that respectfully handed the reigns over to the young challenger. Not the type that held a gun on

you. And where was his own gun?

‘I don’t want to go it alone, Mr Oleson. Not me.’ His eyes skittered around in the darkness trying to see if he’d dropped the gun. He couldn’t actually remember whether or not he’d been carrying it when he was using the E-LT. ‘Boyling, maybe. Maybe he –’

‘I’d trust Boyling with my life. He’s a good student. He’ll be a skilful practitioner. If he gets the chance.’

Ah, so the old bugger was the hand-over-the-reigns type after all. He wanted to hand them over to Boyling and saw all this, what he was doing now, as in some way protecting the boy. And he was right: if Windcott ever got out of this hallway alive he’d slit the kid from ear to ear.

‘You know, Acél has offered to do this for me many times. Kill you, I mean. But I’ve always said no. Sooner or later I had to stop relying on others to do my killing for me.’

There: Windcott could see the E-LT on the floor just behind Oleson’s heel, but he still hadn’t found the gun.

‘And what better person to stop at than the man who was actually trying to kill me? That has some kind of symmetry to it, don’t you think, if no actual poetry.’

But Windcott wasn’t listening. *Where was his gun?* He couldn’t feel its weight inside his jacket any more but then the pain in his hand was so great it was quite likely masking all other sensations to some extent or other. He pushed himself into a half-sitting position, back to the wall, hoping that... yes, there, he felt the gun shift against the lining; it was still there. ‘What are you going to do with me?’ he asked through gritted teeth, not sure whether Oleson had finished talking or not.

‘I have to kill you, John.’

‘Why? Why, Oleson?’ he pleaded, trying to buy more time. He slid sideways so that his weight was supported by his right forearm flat on the floor, hoping it looked as though he was just weakening from the pain. He could now feel the gun against the back of his left hand. ‘We’re a team. I don’t want to go it alone! You, me, Boyling and Acél. We’re a team, Oleson.’

For a moment it seemed Oleson would be drawn into a conversation, but ultimately it was not to be.

‘You won’t shoot me,’ Windcott spat, perhaps changing tactics, perhaps sensing the end. ‘You haven’t got the stomach for it.’

‘I’m doing this for Boyling,’ the older man told himself aloud, his eyes glazing over with emotion.

Windcott made his move, pushing away on his forearm so that the second almost silent shot could only burn a hole in the cheap flooring where he’d been. What little momentum the sudden movement had

given him he used to bowl into Oleson's legs and it was enough to knock the old man off balance.

A person more experienced with killing would have simply aimed the gun downwards and emptied the energy pack. To Oleson, however, the weapon was an unfamiliar object and he dropped it whilst trying to stop himself from falling. Windcott, searching frantically inside his jacket with his left hand and trying to push himself upright without leaning too heavily on his right, saw the gun fall and made a lunge for it, now forgetting his own, which in any case seemed irretrievable. He had it in his grasp before Oleson was truly aware that he'd dropped it himself.

Windcott turned to see his old teacher supporting himself at an angle to the wall, one palm on it. He laughed briefly, unable to believe he'd got away with the manoeuvre. Really, even bloody Boyling would've been able to kill him in that situation. He held Oleson's gun in his left hand – he could shoot well enough left-handed he figured – and wiped his brow with the back of his right. The friction and sweat stung the wound – the bloody laser had lanced right through – but he liked the idea of the image so he bore the pain.

'Need a hand?' he quipped, indicating his own.

But Oleson was now just standing quietly, numbed by inevitability.

'Well, this feels better doesn't it,' said Windcott, getting to his feet and pointing the gun demonstrably at Oleson. 'More like the true order of things, wouldn't you say?'

The old man's silence was frustrating so Windcott shot a hole in the wall above his head. That however was disappointing too; it seemed that the more expensive a gun became the less dramatically it performed. He dropped it, pausing, weaponless, for more than a minute, taunting Oleson, but his ex-tutor made no move. Eventually Windcott drew his own blaster from inside his jacket and began waving it absent-mindedly before him.

'Well, I guess this is the part where I ask if you've got any last words.'

Oleson looked him in the eye. 'Your plan won't work,' he said simply, and Windcott shivered as this cold wave of prediction washed over him. He laughed again but this time it sounded false, hollow in his throat. There was something in Oleson's tone.

'Why? Why won't it work?' He'd wanted to sound mocking but was aware that he must now appear more like a petulant child. He brandished the gun a little for emphasis.

'Someone will stop you. I couldn't but someone will. Braughtigan, perhaps.'

Windcott grunted with relief, all fear banished now that the threats had been given a context he could identify. 'I can handle Braughtigan.

I'll pay Mr Braughtigan a call.'

'He doesn't take bribes. And he's nothing if not persistent.'

'Maybe he's just pissed off that you never offered. No, me and Mr Braughtigan can get together, have a nice little chat about numbers. Don't you worry about that.'

'And you won't fool Bev Tarrant,' Oleson continued, following his own train of thought. 'I looked into her past.' He left the sentence hanging.

'And?' Windcott prompted angrily.

'And she doesn't have one, not until recently when she turned up on the Braxiatel Collection. People without a past aren't easy to fool. It suggests they are the ones who do the fooling.'

'But I already have fooled her,' exclaimed Windcott excitedly. 'She thinks I'm you.'

'In which case you've already failed because you're not doing this on your own after all: you're trading on my good name, my reputation in the business. You're not ready to go out on your own; you're too impatient, you don't have the love for the skills involved. And you will destroy people who deserve better than –'

Windcott fired off a shot and the wide-beam weapon burned a ragged path across Oleson's chest and through his sermon. The old man gasped and went down on his knees, dipping under the small cloud of singed cloth and scorched flesh.

Windcott stepped forward. Oleson was trying to say something and he leaned in closer. 'What, old man? Found some last words after all?'

'Anthony...' breathed Oleson but got no further, the pain in his chest presumably demanding his full attention. Then he toppled slowly sideways and fell with a bubbling gasp onto the coat rack, on which Windcott had lain bleeding just minutes earlier.

Windcott checked the time. He was working to a schedule – he still had to contact this Tarrant woman and arrange a concrete meeting for later – but he figured he could allow himself a bit of a treat. So he stood there quietly and waited for his ex-tutor and respected member of certain communities planet-wide to die. It took over forty-five minutes and Windcott relished every second.

The doctors hadn't had to restrain Adrian and that had surprised Bev. After the initial disorientation had passed he'd relaxed and even seemed to agree with her that, after all, this was the best way they could help Benny. 'What do you think I am, Tarrant,' he'd growled at her, seeing her thoughts in her eyes, 'some sort of animal?'

And that had been a turning point for Bev because she realised that on some level she had been thinking of him as just an animal. She'd ridiculed his emotions and treated him like a kind of bond-slave to get

him here; she'd even, in her own mind, belittled the part he had played in freeing the Collection from Fifth Axis dominion in favour of the more traditionally heroic escapades of Jason Kane, (and by 'more traditionally heroic' she realised she meant 'human'). She couldn't have done all that just based on the fact that he looked like a bloody great dog, could she? She'd known many alien beings even quite fancied one or two of the more exotic ones – and never considered any of them inferior. Or had she? Perhaps she had, perhaps she always had. Or perhaps it was just that Adrian was also a builder, a manual worker, and therefore at some preternatural level to be considered lowly (this regardless of the fact that he was actually the Construction Manager in charge of the whole shebang on one-five-nine and that she could easily be described as a manual worker herself. Salvager? Treasure Seeker? Thief? Opportunist? Oh, take your pick).

Christ, she was a bitch.

The shuttle company had insisted, for insurance purposes, that Adrian recover in the terminal's medical facility, after which they'd both had to sign disclaimers, exonerating the company from liability. Adrian, however, although staying calm, was under no illusions as to who was really responsible.

'Anything could have happened, do you realise that?' he asked her. His voice was its usual gravelly self but there was a strange softness in his tone that Bev couldn't quite pin down.

Having left the terminal, all formalities dispensed with, they'd come straight here to the hotel. Bev had booked them a room from the liner and as she stood in it now being rebuked she wondered how long it would be before Adrian realised there was only the one bed. A double. She'd booked it as cover – respectable couple doing the tourist thing – and had managed to sign them in downstairs without him having cottoned on. I'm going to be in trouble though, she thought, if he gets the wrong end of the stick. I mean, misconstrues the situation, she corrected herself hurriedly. Otherwise I'll soon know how Benny feels: being dogged around all the ti– Shit! She really had to do something about that.

'Sorry, Adrian. But I really think our time will be far better served here. This is where the real killer's trail leads.'

'Maybe,' he admitted reluctantly, sitting down heavily on the bed, still, apparently, not having noticed that it was the only one available to sit on. 'But it was extremely dangerous.'

'Christ, Adrian, next you'll be telling me not to run with scissors.'

'It's not funny, Bev. At the very least I could have been allergic to some chemical in that compound. Just don't do it again, okay?'

And Bev finally figured out what it was that was strange in his tone. 'You sound like a father,' she announced triumphantly.

'I've never met your father, why the hell would I sound like your father?'

'No, not my father,' she explained, sitting on the bed next to him in her excitement. 'A father.' She'd never noticed it before. Probably because you never thought of him as a person before, idiot.

Adrian held her gaze for a moment, wondering why this seemed to be such an amazing discovery for her. 'That's probably because I am a father,' he said simply after a beat. 'Remember? Peter. The whole Benny thing? I – hang on a minute. There's only one bed in here.'

A gentle alarm beeped just then, drawing Bev's attention to a small screen on one of the bedside tables. You Have A Call flashed across it, alternating with the hotel's logo. She hurried across the bed to it on all fours while Adrian still sat examining the top sheet with a quizzical look on his face.

'Hello,' she said virtually diving on the thing and hoping that one of the buttons her open palm had flattened would connect the call. 'Hello. Hello?'

The sour face of the sour receptionist who had received them not ten minutes earlier faded up onto the screen. 'Mrs Wall,' it said. Sourly. Bev heard a grunt of enquiry from behind her and felt the bed shift as Adrian turned round. 'I have a call for a Miss Tarrant, Mrs Wall. The gentleman gave your room number and insisted on being put through.'

'Yes, yes,' Bev said, trying to arrange herself and reclaim at least a hint of dignity. 'That's okay, I'll speak to him.' The receptionist made clear his disapproval as he transferred the call and the screen displayed the hotel logo again as a familiar voice clicked onto the line. 'Miss Tarrant, how nice to finally see you,' it said. (He'd selected the audio-only mode on his unit, as they both had done when he'd contacted her on the liner, but her ad hoc slapping around of the terminal here had evidently connected her via video mode.)

'Mr Oleson,' she began, slipping her legs around to sit properly on the bed and trying to regain some kind of composure. 'Thank you for contacting me so promptly.'

'I do hope I'm not disturbing anything. But I was led to believe you were travelling alone.' She sensed something wrong in his voice. She'd felt the same thing when he'd called her on the liner. It was like this wasn't his usual speech pattern, as though he were trying to emulate someone else.

'I am,' she said thinking quickly, then added, 'Oh you mean... Summerfield. He's just my... shall we say bodyguard.' Adrian remained silent behind her.

Oleson's voice paused, perhaps deciding how to react to this unexpected development.

‘Mr Oleson?’

‘Yes, my dear. I was just thinking what... what a lovely body it was to be needed guarding. That had to be guarded, I mean. Your body.’ He trailed off weakly. Spot on, though Bev: he’s trying to give himself airs and can’t keep up with the syntax.

‘Well thank you.’ She decided to go for the direct approach while she had the edge in the conversation. ‘Then would you like to meet it at around –’ she looked at the time: coming up to six – ‘shall we say midnight? You have a place in mind I take it?’

He did and he told her.

‘Then I look forward to meeting you, Mr Oleson.’

‘Alone, of course.’

Bev took a chance. ‘Of course,’ she said, pausing before she added, ‘except for Mr Summerfield here.’

There was silence on the other end of the line again. This time Bev let it stretch, looking passively into the fonecam built into the centre-top of the screen. Eventually the answer came: Oleson agreed and then somewhat abruptly broke the connection.

She saw that Adrian had now got off the bed and was standing at the minibar. ‘So that was him, then,’ he said, his back still to her. ‘The guy who’s causing Benny all this hassle. Doesn’t sound very professional to me.’

‘No, he doesn’t, does he,’ Bev pondered.

Adrian pulled his head out of the minibar, turned and threw a cold beer across to Bev. ‘But I thought you said that this Oleson bloke was a well-respected thief,’ he said, biting the cap off his own bottle and spitting it to the floor. ‘That didn’t sound like a bloke at the top of his field to me.’

‘No. Me neither. But it was definitely the same man I talked with on the liner. Something’s up here, Adrian. We’d better be careful.’ She looked from the bottle of beer to Adrian and back again. ‘Umm?’ she asked.

Adrian came over to the bed and took the beer. ‘I don’t know about you,’ he said huskily – careful Bev – taking the bottle from her and biting off the cap as he had done his own. ‘But after being told about the reputation of that Acél woman I’m already being about as careful as I can be.’

Braughtigan was working late. But then late was a relative term and implied he had things to be late for, other things that work was stopping him doing. He didn’t. So I guess I’m just working, he thought to himself pulling a face, and it’s just late in the day. But then isn’t it always for some people.

Everyone else in the department had gone home at least an hour

ago, right after the sun had finally become too weak to get through the smoked glass windows, but Braughtigan had stayed on, sitting quietly in the twilight; he'd started a train of thought and didn't want it broken by commuter traffic and the temptation of sitting on the sofa with the sports channels all night.

He was thinking about links, connections, and the name that kept buzzing around at the back of his head was Andrew Oleson's. Oleson was a well-known – what? Braughtigan had his theories as to the nature of Oleson's business but had never been able to prove them. But if he could tie Oleson and his mob into this...

And something was still bugging him about Matthew Barrister. What was it he'd said when he'd seen Braxiatel that morning? 'Thank God you could come,' or words to that effect. That implied an invitation; that Barrister was in some kind of trouble; that they were old friends (okay, that was extrapolation); that Braxiatel was there to lend a hand in some way. And if that were the case, then this rich planetoid-owner was just an innocent bystander, a man who had no connection to either of the two crimes – the theft of the Pawn or the murder of Governor Morton – and it was just a coincidence that he was a collector.

Perhaps the next man would have left it at that but those two words Braughtigan had just unconsciously used – innocent and coincidence somehow didn't fit with what little he knew of Irving Braxiatel.

Braughtigan finally gave in to the oncoming night, reaching over to switch on his desk lamp. The halogen bulb glowed softly.

His phone rang. Green light: outside line.

'Braughtigan.'

'Detective Sergeant. How's things?' The voice was electronically disguised and Braughtigan automatically punched in a short code on the phone's topbox that would both record and try to trace the call.

'I'm fine, just fine. What is it that I can do for you?'

'It's more a case of what I can do for you, I think.'

'That's what I like to hear. Are we friends? Do I know you?'

'Let's say I'm an associate of an acquaintance.'

'Well, it seems a bit of a mouthful but we can say that if you want. So: how can you help me, associate of an acquaintance?'

'Be at the Luxus Casino in two hours. You'll learn something to your advantage about the Purpura Pawn.'

And the connection was cut. Braughtigan knew the call hadn't been long enough to fix the location but he stopped the recording and rummaged around in first one then the other draw for a datacube. He found one with enough storage space and inserted it into the topbox to get a copy of the file off the hard disc. As he did so he quickly punched in the number for Surveillance, two floors above.

‘Manny? Dexter. Listen, I’m bringing a file up. No, right now. Digitally masked voice. Could you run it for me, take it apart?’ He paused for the reply, ejecting then pocketing the datacube and getting to his feet. ‘You’re a gem, Manny.’ He hung up the phone and flicked off the desk lamp before it had had a chance to fully illuminate anything. He checked his watch: seven-twenty. Two hours to get something out of this voice then get over to the casino. The Luxus Casino. The casino that was currently providing room and board to one Irving Braxiatel.

Four

19.30 Boyling stood over the dead body of his teacher and mentor Andrew Oleson, incredulous tears streaking his face. Acél was elsewhere in the apartment.

He'd arrived early at the usual meeting place two blocks over, then Acél had shown up right on time. He hadn't tried to flirt with her in the clumsy way he was hoping she'd sooner or later find endearing: she'd had enough of that when he'd caught up with her last night. To the puppies be playing with the tigers in your country?' she'd asked, sending Boyling weak at the knees with passion and depression in roughly equal amounts. 'I think no, no?' The eternal optimist in him could swear it caught the hint of a teasing smile on her lips – those full, dark, moist lips – but he didn't get another chance because she'd left him in the street, wet and unrequited.

At the meeting place this evening she'd quickly become concerned at Oleson's absence. It was strange that Windcott wasn't there either: he was usually the first to arrive at a divvy-up. Acél had refused to wait more than ten minutes then run off to Oleson's apartment. Boyling hadn't been able to keep up so when he'd got there she was already searching the rooms.

And Oleson was dead.

A soft small hand rested now on Boyling's shoulder. 'He was the good man,' Acél told him quietly, heartbreakingly. Then she continued more formally. 'The Purpura Pawn it isn't here. We go to Windcott.' But Boyling didn't know she was there: he was staring at Oleson's body and telling himself that everything would be okay, just as long as he could be brave enough to not look away this time.

20.00 The Luxus was the largest casino in the city. Matthew Barrister had never stayed in any of the main structure's two thousand five hundred and fifty-eight rooms, certainly had never seen the inside of one of its two hundred and thirty-eight Jacuzzi suites, but he knew what it was to lose money on the floors. From the hovering anti-grav slot machines on the ground floor beyond the foyer (part of the attraction of the Luxus was that it had reconstructed the old coin-operated machines from five hundred years ago), through the card tables crowding the encircling mezzanine, and up onto the first-floor gallery with its roulette wheels and craps stations, the Minister had dropped money in style. The layout of the vast gambling area was almost as intoxicating as the beauty of the circulating women and the drinks they served: all three gaming levels were open to the central space so even if you were losing you could hear the whoops of

someone winning somewhere else, and if you were one of the winners you could survey those around and continue in self-encapsulating superiority. Glass and mirrored elevators went to each level at regular intervals around the walls, going up through each floor and eventually disappearing into the ceiling. Above that were the accommodation levels, which he knew sprawled out to both sides and far behind this playing area. That was why he kept coming back, Matthew told himself: the sheer majesty and intoxication of the place. But he didn't just keep coming back to the Luxus. Over the years

– how many years? – Matthew had mounted up fluctuating debts and credits with every gambling establishment in the city and was only still allowed through their doors because of the complex and tenuous system of repayments he had set up discreetly through 'investment entrepreneurs'. The managements weren't bothered as long as his cheques cleared every month and the other... individuals were keen to push more his way should he need it.

At first, of course, he'd considered that one of the spiders in this financial web must be the man who was blackmailing him but that hadn't made any sense: he was already making money for everyone concerned in extortionate compound interest. No: Purpurin was someone else, someone who needed his cooperation. But with what?

The only thing that was of real concern was that the finely balanced machinery of his personal economic system was being disrupted by the unprecedented length of his current losing streak. Sure, he'd lost before, but it had always balanced out. For the last month, however, it seemed he'd done nothing but lose. And the managements and individuals would start to get twitchy before too long...

The Minister loosened his collar and wiped away the thin sheen of sweat that seemed to be a permanent fixture of his brow these days. Maybe, he thought, just maybe, it wouldn't be such a good idea to step across the threshold this evening...

'Matthew. Good to see you.'

Braxiatel was approaching him up the half dozen carpeted steps from the interior up to the foyer, right hand extended in welcome. He'd changed his formal charcoal-grey suit for a more relaxed midnight blue outfit, complete with a fresh yellow flower, and the intensity Matthew remembered in his friend when they had parted that morning seemed to have dissipated. 'Irving.' The two men shook hands, Braxiatel doing so vigorously.

'Listen,' he began, not breaking the handclasp but instead grasping Matthew's forearm with his free hand. 'I really must apologise for my behaviour before.' The Minister tried to indicate that, without question, there was no need but was cut off uncompromisingly. 'No, no,' continued his friend, 'it was unforgivable. But,' he broke in on

himself suddenly, 'that must all be forgotten about. Now tell me: where shall we go tonight? On me, of course. To what – I believe one of my resident archaeology professors would term them "hot spots",' he paused to consider for a moment. 'Or perhaps the phrase she uses is "flesh pots"... Never mind: to which places of interest will you lead us this evening?'

With his whole right arm still being firmly held, the Minister glanced involuntarily over Braxiatel's shoulder at the floating slot machines just visible in the middle distance, at the almost solid mass of delighted people moving from one to another with their cups of depleting coins. It was a sight that led to promises beyond and made the sweat stand out a little further on his forehead.

Braxiatel aimed a soft and quizzical smile at his friend then flicked his gaze briefly back into the casino. 'You know,' he said in a conciliatory tone, 'we don't have to go anywhere. I mean, if you'd like, we could stay here. At the casino. Have a... a night at the tables. What do you say?' And before the Minister could answer, Braxiatel added, 'My treat of course. I'm sure I could arrange a suitable credit limit with the cashiers for us both.' And his smile broadened conspiratorially. 'Once I tell them which room I'm staying in I'm sure they'll assume that any,' he paused offhandedly, 'unfortunate eventualities could be covered.'

'Well if you're sure,' the Minister began weakly.

'Excellent, that's settled then,' Braxiatel declared and, still holding his arm tightly, led his friend down the red, deep-pile steps.

21.00 Windcott had about half an hour left to kill. Half an hour and maybe half a dozen more people. He chuckled to himself and looked at the shot glass in his hand.

He hadn't been back to his apartment. After Oleson had finally died he'd turned the place upside down looking for the Pawn, eventually finding it at the bottom of a box of dried cat food. Yet the search had frustrated him and when he'd talked to Tarrant he'd been shaken, off guard. But she didn't suspect anything. No, he'd been cool. After leaving the building he'd hidden in the shadows of an alley across the street. He'd seen Acél then Boyling arrive separately at a run then watched them leave slowly together, the woman hugging the boy close to her. Windcott had felt an irrational pang of jealousy at that. They'd walked off, of course, in the direction of his apartment. So that was it then: she was looking for him. The damp night air had suddenly got that much heavier, that much closer.

He would have stayed in the alley until his meet with Tarrant and her goon at midnight but he had another meet at nine-thirty so, deciding he needed a drink, he'd eventually moved off carefully and

come here.

Knocked back, the grain alcohol didn't touch the sides and once Windcott had steadied himself against its acidic aftertaste and the burning in his stomach he shouted through the noise and cigarette fug for another.

The young barman, maybe not yet in his twenties, hurried back down to him and sloshed the spirit over Windcott's hand as he nervously tried to refill the glass. It was his right hand and the liquor soaked painfully into the bandage he'd hurriedly wrapped around it.

'Oi, Denny,' he fulminated, flinching violently. 'For God's sake look what you're doing, will ya.' He tore at the rough bloodstained material to stop the pain but then decided the accident could actually have some antiseptic side effects. 'Hey, give us that bottle,' he snapped and snatched it from Denny who then had to watch while Windcott, through closed eyes and gritted teeth, poured a good quantity of it over the wound. His yells were lost in the general raucousness of the bar and he doused them himself anyway by putting the bottle to his mouth and taking a long pull.

'Hey, Windy, you gu-gonna pay for that?' the boy stammered.

Windcott slammed the bottle down heavily onto the metal bartop and fixed Denny with an animal sneer. 'Guess,' he snarled. Then he noticed that Denny's eyes were darting around the bar as though imploring for help.

Something was up.

He span around, squinting through the smoke, and saw a dozen or more of the ashy clientele hurriedly turn away, back to their drinks and dead-end conversations. Wherever he looked gazes fell like dominoes. They had all been watching him; but watching him as though... as though they were waiting for something to happen to him.

Windcott leapt to his feet, the barstool clattering to the floor behind him, and flung himself across the bar to grab Denny by the throat with his one good hand. 'What's going on?' he yelled, not bothering to hide the fear in his voice: he already knew the answer. But Denny spilled it all instantly in any case, croaking through his painfully constricted larynx.

'She came in about ten minutes before you, Windy. Looking for you. Her and Boyling. Said if we saw you to keep you here. She'd be back.'

'Where? Where was she going?'

Denny was choking now and could hardly speak, so Windcott relaxed his grip a little then pulled the boy's head down violently onto the bar, moving his hand to push his face hard onto the metal surface. He leaned over farther and put all his weight into it. 'Where was she going?' Windcott was frantic. 'Where's she going?'

‘They’re looking for you,’ Denny coughed, his voice muffled by the pressure. ‘All over town. Everywhere. If she finds anyone hiding you she’ll kill them. She said.’ Denny looked up through Windcott’s splayed fingers. ‘She’s pissed, man. What did you do?’

Windcott left the bar at a run, thinking quickly, trying to think clearly. Okay, so he’d miss the nine-thirty meet and just go straight to the hypermall, where he’d be doing the deal with Tarrant. Keep his head down till then. No problem. Right. She won’t find me there.

Windcott scurried off into the night, taking comfort from the bulk of his blaster inside his jacket but wishing he’d picked up the bottle before leaving the bar.

* * * *

21.15 Adrian had been out recceing the hypermall, and when he walked back into the hotel room now he saw Bev standing over the bed with her arms folded, surveying what looked like the users’ demonstration stand at an arms convention. She turned her head and greeted him, a grin of almost childish enthusiasm on her face.

‘Look what I got,’ she said impishly, indicating the arsenal with a nod.

‘Are we expecting trouble?’ he asked flatly.

‘I’ve been shopping.’

‘Shopping,’ echoed Adrian incredulously, getting over the shock and quickly closing the door to the corridor behind him. ‘What the hell have you been buying?’

‘Guns,’ said Bev turning back to the stash. ‘Lots of guns.’

Adrian approached her tentatively. ‘I can see that. When you said you were going out to get us some insurance, I figured a couple of pistols or a side-blaster or something. Not... this. “A bit of firepower,” you said.’ Arranged on the bed were indeed an orderly selection of pistols – both percussion and laser – and a half-metre-long wide-barrelled fusion blaster; but there was also a neuro-stun whip, a shock baton, two single-shot anaesthetic darts, a trip-mine, half a dozen five-centimetre tubular grenades – colour-coded flashes around their centres indicating two each of smoke, flare, and armour rend and a precision-bore laser-sighted pulse rifle. Everything that took solid-shell ammunition was paired with at least two red cardboard boxes, presumably containing what was required, and the more sophisticated items had spare energy cells and charge indicators in the green.

‘Well,’ protested Bev, ‘I got carried away, didn’t I. You see, I’ve got a pretty limitless credit-transfer chip from Brax, otherwise I’d never be able to buy anything for him once I’d found it. Where d’you think I was going to get the money for Oleson from?’ She shrugged. ‘And I’ve always assumed it’s to be used for expenses too.’ Sweeping one arm over the bed in indication she added, ‘*Voici les expenses.*’

Bev explained that she'd had a productive three hours, reaping the benefits of arrangements she'd made by scrambled deep-space comm link from the liner with a group of 'specialised dealers' here in the city. They'd at first been suspicious, of course, because she was a new buyer and, she was told, it took time to okay that kind of thing. Then she'd told them the price she was prepared to pay and they'd become even more suspicious. Finally, when they were satisfied she'd turned up alone tonight, they'd decided they weren't that suspicious, stuck an extra seven per cent on the price and left fifteen minutes later with very little to carry in the way of hardware and wishing they'd asked for ten.

'The whip was a freebie,' she added mischievously. 'I think they liked me. And anyway, you wouldn't want to go up against Acél with just a pistol or a side-blaster, would you?'

Adrian had to admit to himself that was true but pointed a long-clawed finger at her chidingly all the same. 'I don't even want to know anymore,' he said, trying to disapprove but unable to completely hide the admiration in his tone.

'Thanks, dad,' Bev responded. 'So how's the lay of the land out at the hypermall?'

'Bad,' growled Adrian, moving three of the pistols so he could sit down at the head of the bed. 'We're going to need that,' he added, indicating the rifle. 'The building's huge, maybe two hundred thousand square metres on four levels. Oleson could stick any number of snipers anywhere he wanted and we'd know nothing about it. And it looks like it hasn't been used for a decade. I asked a couple of guys sleeping in one of the entrances why it hadn't just been pulled down and they said there's some kind of dispute over ownership of the land. Some guy died or something, I don't know. Anyway, the point is it's still there and even without the snipers it's a bloody death trap, bits are falling off it everywhere you look. The basic structure seems sound enough and the foundations are holding everything upright but the interior's shot.'

'You got inside okay then.'

'Easy enough but apparently even the old gangs don't go in there anymore. It's in a part of something called the undercity and it isn't a nice part of town. Used to be teeming with gangs, seems it was something of an arena a while back, but now even the headbangers don't risk it. The homeless guys were sleeping out in the rain rather than go inside.'

'Great.' Bev brushed some of the grenades to the floor as she sat down heavily on the bed. Adrian winced. 'Tat lot of good this lot is going to be to us, then,' she said. 'One explosion in the wrong place or a stray percussive shot and the ceiling'll come down.'

‘Maybe.’ Adrian was thinking. ‘That does mean though that however many heavies Oleson brings along besides Acél, they’re going to have the same problem.’ He stood up, having made a decision. ‘Bring the explosives anyway.’

Bev eyed him curiously. ‘What have you got in mind, Adrian Wall?’ she asked, incidentally surprised that his adopted name for once didn’t sound funny to her.

Adrian knelt to retrieve the grenade cylinders. ‘My work may be construction but sometimes before you can put things up you’ve got to bring things down, and for that you’ve got to know what you’re doing.’

21.45 Braughtigan was late. He’d spent over two hours with Manny up in Surveillance deciphering the altered voice file and was now hoping that whoever the mystery man was he’d been nice enough to stick around. And he was still a mystery man: for all Manny’s efforts at dividing the file into what he called slices of sound, layering them, deleting the obviously artificial and capping the modulations they still had no idea as to the caller’s identity.

‘You know the guy?’ Manny had asked, playing back his final attempt at nine-twenty.

‘It could be your mother for all I know,’ Braughtigan had said in disgust, throwing his crushed plastic water-cup across the lab.

‘So it’s my mother,’ Manny had shrugged, pushing his spectacles up the bridge of his nose and squinting hard as though they actually worsened his eyesight. ‘We can all go home. You ain’t gonna get no more out of that except a headache, though I think if you tweak the gain another half per cent you’ll hear a Rabbi doing the one about the two nuns and the bar of soap.’

‘Night Manny, you’re a gem,’ said Braughtigan shucking on his jacket.

‘Ha. Gem-shmem. At home with my wife is what I should be,’ came the call from behind Braughtigan as he’d headed for the lift.

And so he was late as he trotted his bulk up the extravagant marble steps to the distant entrance of the Luxus casino. Halfway up he ran out of breath and slowed to a walk. What the hell. After all, did he really expect this to lead anywhere? An anonymous tip-off and a meet arranged in the swankiest casino in town? Could be a set-up. Maybe someone would try and blackmail him before the night was out, never mind if anyone was putting the finger on Barrister. He looked up at the gleaming glass and granite facia modelled as a reproduction of some cliff face that had existed three centuries ago in some exotic locale or other. Artificial waterfalls cascaded either side of the entrance from an untold number of storeys above and vast

accommodation blocks reached hundreds of metres left and right, streaked ground to roof with great external glass elevators. Braughtigan got a crick in his neck. Here play the bad guys, he thought.

He'd never been inside the Luxus before and he certainly didn't look the part tonight. Once through revolving doors the size of his entire apartment he was pounced upon, taken aside and quietly asked whether he wouldn't rather quickly return home and change, the casino would be glad to provide a cab for him. Braughtigan had been ready for this.

'Actually, I'm here to see Irving Braxiatel. Old friend. Spoke to him this morning and he asked me to swing by.' He watched the panic start. 'I'm a little late,' he added to increase the tension.

They provided him with a shirt and jacket – both of which, impressively, fitted him perfectly – as well as a tie but were sorry to inform him that Mr Braxiatel had left a message that he would be out for the evening. 'Well, I did say I was late.' Braughtigan was offered champagne and asked if there was anywhere in particular he would like to wait for his friend. 'I'll mingle,' he said, and taking the glass strode off into the casino.

Matthew Barrister was losing and losing big. He was also loving every second of it. He'd dropped a bundle at everything from craps to Vingt-et-Un and was right now enthralled in a fifteen-minute losing streak at Banco, the shoe having passed to everyone at the table but him. But it was Brax's money. Brax was a friend and Brax would sort everything. He'd disappeared about half an hour ago but had assured Matthew that the sky was the limit and that he deserved to relax after what he'd been through. Jolly right too, he thought, the bank winning the current hand and his cards being scooped away from him in that wondrous way in which they do things in Banco, using that thing, oh what was it called, the spatula thing. So elegant, such sophistication, how oh, there it went again! Scooping them away from him. Delightful. Ah, the taste of another culture.

A young woman wearing a sheer high-cut one-piece swimming costume and black stilettos was suddenly at his side and proffering another glass of whatever it was he'd been drinking all evening. 'Thank you no, my dear, but I think – oh well, then, if you insist.' And she was gone in a faint cloud of perfume and promise. The Minister's head was spinning faster than the roulette wheel he'd contributed a sackful of chips to earlier but he tried all the same to follow her with his eyes. He leaned back and, not really knowing in which direction she'd gone, looked over the mezzanine rail and down onto the first floor.

And there saw the gargantuan form of Detective Sergeant Dexter Braughtigan. Looking right back up at him.

Braughtigan saw the Minister bolt from the *Banco* table like a half-cut hare, and the policeman's usually lumbering form was instantly galvanised into action. When a person connected to a murder investigation, however indirectly, catches sight of the investigating officer and makes a run for it, well, that surely warrants a chase. He moved heavily across the floor towards the nearest lift whilst keeping his eyes on all the others that Barrister could conceivably run to on the mezzanine. Then he stopped: there were too many, the prey had too many options. He could be running to Braxiatel's room – it seemed obvious to assume the one man was the guest of the other this evening – but on the other hand he'd be easily found there. Straight for the door, then? Possibly, although that would mean coming down past Braughtigan and avoiding a nasty scene would be almost impossible. Could he stay on the mezzanine level? The policeman twisted round to take in as many of the lifts about him as possible but there were too many. He placed his untouched glass of champagne on a passing half-naked woman's tray then turned back to study the side of the room where he'd first seen Barrister. The part of the back wall of the mezzanine level where people got into and out of the lifts wasn't visible to him from here but the lifts were glass and he'd soon see which way the leporine little man was headed.

And there he was: going up, his nervous little face flushed a deep red and pushed right up close to the transparent wall of the elevator as he agitatedly scanned the ground floor for any sight of Braughtigan. The policeman, hardly inconspicuous unless perhaps in a crowd of Killorans, didn't bother to conceal himself, and was soon spotted, the Minister pressing his palms quickly to the glass as though to steady himself from the shock. Braughtigan held his gaze as the elevator rose. Under normal circumstances he'd perhaps grin at or wave to the perp, shake him up a bit; but this particular hare seemed scared enough already. But what exactly was he frightened of?

Braughtigan lost sight of the lift for a moment as it disappeared up to the first-floor gambling level and stopped, but when it resumed and came back into view higher up he could see that Barrister was still inside. So, he was heading to the accommodation levels. Braughtigan knew that the hare would be as good as lost in the warren of rooms above unless... Assuming he didn't have a keycard for Braxiatel's room and that he wasn't thinking clearly enough to realise he could simply get off at any floor and be lost to Braughtigan in the corridors, what would he be trying to do? To get out of the casino... That was it: he must be making for the *external* lifts on the front of the building.

Braughtigan made an awkward dash through the crush of people around him, accidentally knocking cups of coins from the hands of ubiquitous rich old ladies and spinning into one of the waitresses, sending her over onto her perfect arse. Leaving chaos in his wake he emerged from the crowd and flung himself at the target elevator, diving inside just as the doors were closing. It was a bit of a squeeze and the others voiced their disapproval at the suddenness of his appearance. Braughtigan elbowed his way across to the control panel and hit the cancel/override switch, then punched the button for the first accommodation level. Those people who had wanted to go to the mezzanine or gallery told him once again how rude he was. 'Terribly sorry,' he explained holding his stomach. 'Ate something dodgy at that flash place in the galleria. Got to get back to my room. Coming out of both ends, don't you know.' And suddenly a small but undisputed semi-circle of empty space appeared around him.

The elevator jerked upwards, perhaps a little unhappy at the excess weight it had been asked to accommodate at the last moment, and passed first through the mezzanine level, then the gallery, to emerge onto the first accommodation level. The glass doors slid open silently to let Braughtigan out, everyone else staying firmly where they were. 'Don't have the fish,' he said casually over his shoulder, looking up and down the corridor to get his bearings as the elevator resealed itself and descended.

The corridor stretched left and right, doors to rooms at regular intervals on either side, and between each second door was another corridor leading in either direction. Getting a sense of where he was in the building, Braughtigan knew that the corridors leading before him stretched out over the gaming area and those behind went into the accommodation block he'd seen to the right of the casino's main entrance. The front of the casino was away to his left and that, he guessed, was where Barrister would be heading, but had he got out on this floor? Logically he should have but he was panicked so who could tell? He'd come up in the third lift to the right, hadn't he? Braughtigan headed left at a half run, taking fleeting glances up and down each new corridor at every junction.

It took him two or three minutes to reach the front of the building and the final perpendicular corridor. What he'd thought was a floor-to-ceiling window before him he realised were actually the doors to one of the external lifts. Looking up he saw this particular lift heading skywards and as it was the nearest, laterally, to the casino entrance to the right below, Braughtigan immediately jogged off to the left.

At every set of external glass doors he stopped to see in which direction the associated elevator was heading and at each he could also just catch a glimpse of the next in line. That's how he knew when

he was at the fourth that the fifth was on its way down and that Matthew Barrister was in it.

In as much as he could, Braughtigan broke into a headlong run and when he reached the doors he threw himself bodily against the call button. But he was half a second too late: the lift, with the Minister inside it, was sliding slowly past and Braughtigan had lost his hare. The two men stared into each other, the policeman squinting and out of breath, the minister wide-eyed and panting with fear. Barrister craned his neck up to watch Braughtigan through the glass ceiling and then was gone.

Braughtigan's first reaction was to punch the doors in frustration but then he stopped to think. He'd learned something. He'd known before that Barrister was scared of someone or something but now he knew that the man was virtually demented with fear. And it wasn't him, Braughtigan, per se he feared; no; it was information, something that the policeman could find out about him. Something he'd done? Something he was being blackmailed for, if indeed he was being blackmailed? Or something he was planning to do, being made to do? Yes. The Minister was nothing in himself, Braughtigan was sure of that now. Rather he was someone else's puppet, dangling on a string and afraid of falling. And the fact that he'd been allowed to leave the casino without first going to the cashiers was interesting. If he'd been winning he obviously didn't care about the chips, and had he been losing the Luxus must have known he was good for it. So: was the Honourable Minister a man with money or money problems?

Something about all this suddenly seemed to be suggesting something to Braughtigan. Most of it was there, he felt sure. If only he could get the pieces the right way round.

He stood in the corridor for a time catching his breath then punched the call button again for the lift. He may not have met Mr Mystery tonight but he now had a pretty good idea who the man was, and that he'd discovered what it was he'd been brought here to discover.

But that didn't mean he had to play along and jump to the conclusions that were expected of him.

23.20 Denny was having a bad night. Usually he'd have said that a beautiful woman holding him tightly was a good thing. But not by the face. And not with the point of a knife dimpling his cheek. No one in the bar had moved to help him because, despite appearances, no one in the bar was quite that stupid.

'I don't know,' he screamed as loudly as he could through teeth that Acél's grip had clamped together. 'I haven't seen him, I told you.'

Acél squeezed tighter. 'He was here. Say us where he go.'

Boyling stepped purposely forwards through the smoke, a painful

scowl of confusion engraved into his features. 'It's important, Denny,' he said, his voice trembling. 'Stacy lost half an ear before she told us. We know he was here, just tell us where he went. I swear to God if you don't I'll slice you up.'

Acél, as if on cue, dragged the blade across Denny's face to nestle sharply under his earlobe, tiny beads of burning blood rising slowly in its wake.

'Downtown, downtown,' Denny shrieked. 'He left here to the right, going downtown. About two hours back that's all I know, I swear.'

Acél let him drop and left the bar without another word. Boyling frustratedly punched a tear from his eye, wanting to apologise to his friend Denny but wanting to stay angry more, then hurried after her. It was raining lightly now but neither of them noticed it.

'Acél wait,' Boyling shouted.

'We go back to the next bar,' Acél said simply, sticking to the systematic search procedure they'd adopted all night. 'He can be anywhere.'

'Wait. I said wait,' he repeated angrily. Acél stopped dead and turned. 'I think I know where he may be now,' Boyling said, spitting out rain.

'Where?'

Boyling slowed down to a normal walk and caught up with her. 'He's moving downtown, from Oleson's to here and now down this way. I know where he's going.' Acél waited for him to continue, the rain running down her face from the fringe of her short black hair. 'He used to be in a gang that set up fights in the old hypermall,' Boyling continued. 'No one goes there now, I reckon he thinks he'll be safe for the night.' He paused, turning his head in the direction they had to go. 'But he won't be.'

Acél stared at him for a moment, as if seeing him not as a funny little boy but instead someone who had become a man. She placed her hand on his shoulder. 'We will find him,' she said and slipping her arm around him led Boyling away through the rain.

23.40 Windcott knew he had to concentrate. He reckoned he could handle the Tarrant woman but her muscle had looked as though he'd be a bit tasty at close quarters. Some kind of alien or mutant or something. Definitely don't let that one get too near. He'd considered laying flat in the debris on a third-floor escalator and picking them both off with the blaster. Not too accurate at anything over short range but then if he was hidden well enough he could afford to let them get pretty much on top of him. Yeah: blam, blam, then just nip down and get the money.

But maybe Oleson had taught him something after all because he

could hear the old fool preaching. ‘Never change the plan. Even if you get to the meet and something unexpected happens and it looks as though the world’s being given to you on a stick. Never change the plan.’ And, well, he supposed, after all, that there was no point wasting a couple of good blaster shots if he didn’t have to. Might attract some of the tramps and he could do without that. He’d had to waste two of them earlier because they’d seen him coming in here. So no: meet them, give them the Pawn, take the dough, say the goodbyes; then he’d find out when they were leaving the planet and make a call to his man on the inside and give him his instructions. Yeah, he’d made up his own mind to stick to the plan.

But all the same he’d have to concentrate and that was a little difficult right now because of the tsunami of nostalgia that had been crashing down upon him since he’d stumbled over the rubble and onto the ground-floor concourse. The place had certainly changed over the years. Then too, of course, it had been pretty much derelict with most of the glass broken and shop fronts burned out; but now you could almost hear it falling down around you, smell the creep of entropy that turned concrete to dust, rubber to powder and metal to rusted flakes. The rain came through even right down to here. Not a lot, but there was the constant echoing splash of drops from a million different places all around.

Just there, over in the open square between the array of escalators: that had been the main arena where they’d held all the fights. He’d been more of an organiser than a combatant himself, of course, but he’d lived every glorious round in his head. He’d been something of a manager to the greatest fighter of them all: a brutish hulk of a thing that had a fixation with the history of the British aristocracy. Called himself Sir Roderick Weld-Moore and had been unbeaten in the ring for almost eighteen months. Ah, those were the days. And if it hadn’t been for an ice pick finding its way into the back of Sir Roderick’s head one night in round seven they may have still been going... But instead the bouts had slackened off, the place abandoned and he’d looked for his associated glory elsewhere. And found it eventually in Olseon’s mob which –

A sound. A movement. On the floor above? Or the third? Dust and ash floated down into the court from somewhere above. So, they were coming the long way round, were they? Fair enough, they were only being careful after all. Windcott checked the charge in his blaster – it’s not necessarily changing the plan, he told himself, just keeping a contingency in mind – and stepped back over the ground glass and into the shadows.

‘See if you can make a little more noise will you, Adrian, we are trying

to make this difficult for ourselves after all.'

Adrian got to his feet and brushed the detritus from his overalls. Miniscule shards of glass caught in his fur and stung just under the surface of his skin. Bev rolled her eyes in her head despairingly as the Killoran growled and crunched over more fire-damaged masonry. She bent to retrieve the small rucksack he'd dropped containing the six grenades, tripwire mine and two of the pistols. He still had the blaster strapped to his leg and Bev carried the rifle slung across her back.

It had been Bev's idea to get into the hypermall on one of the upper levels but she'd had to admit it wouldn't have been feasible if they hadn't found the makeshift tower of junk at the rear of the building. Others had evidently had the same idea at some point in the past and made an irregular stairway from packing crates, beams, scaffolding poles and just about anything that would lie safely on top of anything else. It had been an awkward climb but had got them to a little below the second floor, from where they'd just about been able to scramble over a lintel and into the complex. Adrian had had to scramble a little more than Bev, his extra weight causing a loose section of brickwork to sway under him, but fortunately it had sent him falling forwards rather than back out into thin air. It was this tumble he had just brushed himself down from.

'Let me know if this gets too much for you at any point, won't you, dad,' Bev said mock-seriously as she handed him back the rucksack. 'I can always do everything myself after all.'

Adrian snatched the bag from her. 'It's a dog's life, isn't it, eh?' he said with a snarl.

Touché, thought Bev. Maybe the person she'd recently found under all that fur had a sense of humour.

The window they'd come in through gave onto a landing in a wide, open stairwell, the way down which was completely blocked by the flight above it having collapsed.

'There's one floor above, don't we want to check that out too?' Adrian asked, passing her, getting back to business. Rubble and rubbish from a lost way of life crunched and moved and disintegrated underfoot with every step he took.

Bev shook her head. 'We're supposed to be meeting on the ground floor, so if Oleson wanted to try and outflank us I guess he'd send Acél up a flight or two. No point sending her all the way to the top. I say we forget it.'

'Sounds fair enough to me. Let's get our bearings.'

Together they moved carefully out of the landing and onto the second-floor walkway that ran around all four sides of the hypermall; it was two metres wide and there were others above and below. Over what was left of a handrail they'd be able to see all the way down to

the ground floor but they were instinctively keeping close to the shells of the units at their backs so as not to be seen. Visibility was poor but moonlight struggled in through the broken windows in the stairwells and from unseen places above as well.

After a moment Bev broke the tension. 'So? You're the expert, what do you think?'

Adrian looked back at the stairwell, his eyes squaring up every centimetre. Not there,' he said definitively, 'it's too unsound as it is. It'll go where it wants not where I tell it.'

'Good. The next flight along'd probably be better for us anyway. Closer to Oleson. Closer to the exit.' Bev had made up her mind and with Adrian following moved off carefully along the walkway.

'I thought this was all about us making our own exit,' he rumbled to himself.

Ten minutes later they emerged on the ground floor: there was an open space before them, perhaps fifty metres or so wide, strewn with rubbish and debris and skirted by nests of dead escalators that had once gone in both directions but now went nowhere. Must have been a busy place in its day.

'Miss Tarrant. Nice to finally meet you in person.' Windcott stepped out of the frame of a unit across the other side of the court, his raised voice ringing strangely in the hypermall's jagged acoustics.

That did it for Bev: whoever this joker was he wasn't the real Oleson; the voice on the comm hadn't fitted with the reputation and now that she finally saw the face and the posture, however poor the light in here, he was obviously one far more at home in a place like this than an intergalactic crime ring. But what was going on? Was he just trading under Oleson's name? Perhaps he was police, undercover, using the Purpura Pawn to flush out collectors willing to trade in death. She shot a steely glance up at Adrian who acknowledged it with a curl of his thick upper lip. So: they both knew the score.

'Mr Oleson,' she called. 'I have the money. I take it you have what we want.'

Windcott chuckled. 'That's what I like: a woman who gets right down to it. Please,' he said with mock grandeur, indicating the centre of the area between them. 'Shall we meet each other halfway?' And he took the first step, as though it were some gesture of compromise or good will on his part.

Bev and Adrian started forward. 'We were just admiring your choice of venue,' Bev began conversationally.

'Ah, I see. Is that why you snuck in quietly,' he emphasised the word sarcastically, 'on one of the upper floors? To do a bit of shopping perhaps?' The three of them were now moving towards one another at

a wary, measured pace.

‘We thought we’d see if you had any associates about.’

‘Associates? Really? I seem to remember the deal being we met alone. I, at least, am a man of my word,’ he added with a nod towards Adrian now that they were closer.

‘What? No Hungarian dominatrix waiting in the wings for a late entrance in the final act?’

That hit the spot: ‘Oleson’ actually missed his footing and tripped on a mass of misshapen melted plastic. He stopped. Bev and Adrian stopped too. Adrian’s hand fell to the butt of the blaster worn openly on his thigh. Bev held out her hands, palms upwards, towards ‘Oleson’. ‘It’s just that we’d been hoping to meet AM.,’ she called, louder than she needed to across the ten metres that now separated them. ‘She will be joining us, won’t she?’

Adrian growled down at her. ‘What do you think you’re doing, you mad...’ Words seemed to fail him until he eventually settled on, ‘human woman. We’re here to get the artefact thing for Jason and get out.’

Without taking her eyes off the man posing as Oleson before her she explained things quietly to her companion. ‘Something’s going on here, Adrian. Usually I’d agree with you: in and out without even having to say hello if you can avoid it. But this isn’t Oleson. And if that ain’t Oleson then there ain’t no Acél, right?’

Adrian squinted hard as though to help his concentration, then had to snap out of it quickly because Bev had suddenly taken off at a brisk walk towards... whoever.

Windcott took an involuntary step backwards seeing Tarrant coming at him, arms out in enquiry. Was she in with Acél? Was Acél here? Was this all a revenge plot hatched by that killer? No, don’t be stupid, he’d first talked with Tarrant a week ago, long before he’d killed Oleson. What then? Was she here to kill all of them? Hell, man, get a grip, why would she want to do that? You tell me: who was she? Did you check her out thoroughly like Oleson had always taught you? ‘Know the mark better than his mother knows him.’

Oh shit.

Windcott heard the sound of the cheering crowds in his ears as Sir Roderick Weld-Moore waded in for another kill. The old days are always so much less complicated, he thought.

And suddenly she was standing right up close and personal. ‘Listen,’ she was saying, her serious eyes burning straight through him, her forehead damn near touching his. She still hadn’t pulled out a weapon, he noticed – just as well because he’d completely forgotten about his own – and that somehow made her all the more scary. ‘I

don't know who you are and I don't want to know. But I do want the Purpura Pawn because it's going to help out a friend of ours.' And he saw now that the dog-thing was at her shoulder panting down at him. He had pulled out a gun. 'Now I'm guessing you're not the guy who actually stole it.' Windcott shook his head vigorously. 'Otherwise,' she continued, 'I'd be taking you with me too. No, all I want is the Pawn. And I'm even going to pay you what we agreed for it, how's that?'

Bev stepped back slightly to let the impostor put his hand nervously into his pocket. Adrian bared his teeth and gripped his blaster tightly as the thief brought out a small item wrapped in some kind of animal skin.

'...conclusive proof of the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth.'

And then a scream of anger was suddenly echoing about them so that Bev thought the whole place would be brought down with its vibrations. The man who wasn't really Oleson spasmed violently with fright and dropped the Purpura Pawn.

Windcott! Windcott. *I'm going to kill you, you murdering son of a bitch!*

From further along the ground floor concourse a... boy was running towards them. He was maybe still a hundred metres away and stumbling over the ruins with every stride but Bev could see that his face was streaked with tears. Further behind him, though walking at her own pace, was a woman. Bev exchanged glances with Adrian. 'Who are they?' Adrian just shrugged so she turned to the man – what was his name? Windcott?

'Well,' Windcott began, his hand disappearing inside his jacket. 'The kid is called Boyling. He's a sort of friend of mine.'

'Great. And the woman?' But Bev knew the answer to that one. She swung the pulse rifle off her back and flipped up the sights.

'The woman?' Windcott asked, producing his blaster. Instantly he felt the barrel of Adrian's weapon punch into the nape of his neck but he took no notice. 'Oh, that's Acél. I expect she's going to kill us.'

Bev watched as, despite this prediction, the man raised his gun and fired off half a dozen shots past Boyling and directly at Acél. The first two went wide and the other four, dead on target, were diffused by some kind of energy field that engulfed the woman in a burst of brilliant light for a number of seconds but didn't stop her advance in the slightest. Boyling was still clumsily closing the distance between them too.

Adrian growled. 'I think he might be right.' He considered Boyling. The boy wasn't visibly armed but seemed angry enough to cause some trouble with his bare hands. 'This isn't our fight anymore. What are we going to do?'

Bev's eyes were hurriedly searching the litter at their feet. 'Get the Pawn and leave?' she suggested.

'Sounds like a plan.' Then he noticed that Windcott was bringing his blaster round to bear on the kid. A kid whose only weapon at that moment was, to all intents and purposes, a pissed-off attitude.

Adrian gave out a brief roar of frustration as he realised that despite what he'd just said he was about to make it their fight again.

He had no reason – yet – to kill Windcott and so a blaster shot was out of the question: they were still standing close enough to one another for the shot to turn the guy inside out. So Adrian was balling his fist to deliver a stunning rabbit punch to the fraud's kidneys when the ground at their feet erupted and sent them both stumbling away from one another.

A stray shot? No. As he regained his balance and saw Boyling hurtle into Windcott with the force of a piledriver sinking foundations, Adrian knew that Acél's aim had been right on target: disrupt Windcott's focus, keep Adrian away from him, and let the kid take him apart the old fashioned way. There was a personal thing going on here and Adrian decided once and for all they needed to get the hell out of it.

But as he turned to warn Bev she was already raising the rifle butt to her shoulder and thumbing the sights to get a line on Acél.

A single shot took his companion down with a simplicity that was almost beautiful, penetrating her left thigh and lancing right through to scorch the ground behind her. Blood fountained sickeningly. Bev dropped the gun and fell sideways on her good knee screaming, both hands flying to tightly encircle the pierced limb, her combats already saturated.

'Bev!'

Acél was still moving towards them and adjusting her aim, this time zeroing in on Adrian. The Killoran threw himself forwards to cover Bev, with the one movement shielding her body and incidentally dodging the needle of energy that passed though the air he'd just occupied. His hard, muscled frame pinning the injured woman to the uneven ground, his weight supported heavily on his right forearm, Adrian fired blast after blast at the advancing killer, huge fangs bared in anger. Each shot found its mark but was instantaneously diffused by Acél's refraction field. The energy was building up around her until she was like an enormous vengeful sun being sent supernova by the continuing impacts of Adrian's unerring marksmanship.

Bev was still screaming.

Adrian let out a great guttural cry that came from deep in his chest and seemed to want to rip out this throat, vibrating every nerve-ending in Bev's body. Through his fury he saw the ball of converted

energy that was Acél finally begin to falter in its advance.

'You've been shot. Lie still,' he yelled as though to answer Bev's screams.

"Shot"? I know I've been shot,' wailed the thrashing bulk beneath him almost incoherently. 'It feels like she cut my damn leg off And then she was just yelling, the words lost under the pain and gunfire.

'Bev!' bellowed Adrian, desperately afraid for his friend now. 'Talk to me.' She was screaming preternaturally but one phrase came though clearly. 'Shut up and save my arse, you bloody great animal!'

Without reducing his rate of fire, Adrian was now using his left hand to bring the rucksack off his shoulder and round to his front. 'You're not very comfortable around me are you, Bev,' he growled conversationally, tearing open the Velcro tabs and upending the bag's contents on the pitted ground.

'Look, Pooch,' she spat through agonisingly gritted teeth, not enough oxygen left for screaming now. 'This is hardly the time for a talk-show moment. Now are you going to get me out of here alive or do I have to throw you a bloody bone?'

The alarm in Adrian's blaster suddenly let out a high-pitched double tone, telling him that he was down to thirty per cent power. But he kept up the intensity of his firing. Acél had now stopped moving altogether, completely engulfed in the glare, evidently having decided to weather the ineffectual bombardment. 'You know what, Bev?' Adrian said, frantically sorting through the few items they hadn't already used from the rucksack. 'I think after all I'm actually beginning to like you.' Then his hairy fist suddenly snatched at the one armour-rend grenade they had left and his mind was back on the job. 'Can you still use that rifle?'

'As long as you don't want me to do it with my left leg, sure I can –'

Her own weak cry cut her off in mid sentence: Adrian had moved off her but having no free hands had inadvertently placed all his weight on her wounded leg to pivot himself up. 'Then shoot out the strut,' he bellowed over her. 'We need an exit. Do it now!'

Cursing, Bev let go of her thigh and reached for the pulse rifle. The flow of blood from her leg increased dramatically and she could feel a heavy black pressure building inside her head. She had a vague impression of Adrian discarding his blaster and pulling back his arm as though to throw a grenade but it was all surely happening too slowly to be real. Concentrate. Concentrate.

Resting on her right elbow she steadied the rifle against her hip. It didn't have to be too accurate a shot, just take out the wooden strut so that it disturbed the trip wire and detonated the carefully placed explosives; they'd set up the escape plan with a bad-case scenario in mind. Perhaps not this bad, though...

Adrian was arcing his arm around now and shouting something but what it was and whether or not it had even been directed at her she couldn't have said.

She tried to blink out some of the blackness, some of the pressure, but it wouldn't lift. Her nose felt blocked, the way it had done in the spring when she was a child and forgot her antihistamine pills.

Adrian had now turned back towards her, his great clawed hands so close to her face.

And squinting through the pain and the ringing white noise that seemed against all the laws of physics to be filling a vacuum bubble around her, Bev finally focused on the stairwell and channelled all her remaining strength into squeezing the trigger.

The instant she did so she felt Adrian's powerful arms scooping her off the ground and flinging her across his shoulder, the rifle lost at his feet. From somewhere she heard a sharp detonation and the surprised shriek of a woman's voice, but it was immediately swallowed by a thud and compression in the air as an almighty explosion filled her world.

Adrian was running now and she was being tossed this way and that, her chin cracking off the solid bones in the small of his back. A thumping shower of shrapnel was pelting down around them and she wondered if any of it was hitting her. Then she seemed to be enwrapped, her hair lashing her face, by a sudden, freezing, current of night air. It revived her slightly and cleared her head enough for her to realise they were outside again. It was raining still.

She heard voices, men shouting, and any number of guns being cocked and charged. Then Adrian was gently lowering her to the ground and the release of blood that flushed from her head gave her a sudden flash of lucidity.

They were surrounded by law enforcement officers, each pointing guns and high beam torches at them.

'We're unarmed,' Adrian was shouting, clamping both of his huge hands around the top of her ruined thigh. 'We're unarmed. And this woman needs medical attention. Now!'

A lone man was running towards them, a big man, almost as big as Adrian she fancied. She heard Adrian snarl as he moved himself round to be between her and the policeman. Down boy, she tried to say but didn't know how to speak.

'It's okay,' the man began to explain. 'Medics are on the way. We're here to help. My name's Dexter. Dexter Braughtigan, I'm a police officer. We're going to get you out of here, okay?'

And just as the confusion and chaos was beginning to clear for Beverly Tarrant, and she felt safe enough to perhaps let go of consciousness for a while and dive into that black echoic pool, the

sharp crack of a single percussion gunshot rang out from the depths of the hypermall.

Five

As the sun rose through the buildings behind him and young red sunlight began to warm the back of his office chair, Matthew Barrister, Head of the Acquisition of Alien Artefacts department, smiled and once again shook his head in disbelief at how blindly stupid he'd been. And also in appreciation of how good genuine Irish whiskey tasted at six-thirty in the morning.

Why had he run from Braughtigan last night? He'd only been delaying the inevitable, the man was sure to turn up here this morning, perhaps at any moment, and now he'd made himself look even more guilty. Well, what did that matter anyway? Hadn't he already resigned himself to losing everything? He'd told Braxiatel he wouldn't give in to blackmail even if it meant, as he knew it surely must, the end of his career and reputation. Purpurin would broadcast his gambling debts and that would be that. And in any case he'd as good as told the police himself of the debts by running like an idiot from the Luxus. And he'd have to call Braxiatel and apologise for disappearing like that. If only he'd taken his friend's suggestion and gone out on the town, hadn't been so weak and unable to resist the tables. Braxiatel's money was no good to him now. Even if he'd called that minute and offered to transfer the total directly, the association would have already been made in Braughtigan's mind. Maybe Purpurin couldn't blackmail him, but his name would be tied to the murder and in politics that was one of many possible first steps towards a dignified resignation.

The phone on his desk rang and the Minister looked at it quizzically through his whiskey glass. Why was a call coming through to his office? His secretary wasn't in yet but the exchange should be handling all that. The ringing persisted. Braxiatel? The police?

No. As the Minister leaned forwards across his desk and lifted the receiver to his ear he knew exactly whose voice he would hear.

'Hello.'

And indeed the electronically encoded voice was at once chillingly familiar. 'Well good morning, Mr Barrister,' began Purpurin. 'I trust you enjoyed the entertainment I arranged for you last night.'

And Matthew Barrister suddenly glimpsed a fraction of the bigger picture. 'You.' His voice was calm, his tone accepting the inevitable. 'You arranged for Braughtigan to be at the Luxus.'

'Oh more than that, Matthew,' said the voice lightly, pitching irregularly, randomly, so that the words almost sounded like musical notes. 'I arranged for you to be losing when he got there.'

'That's impossible,' said the Minister firmly, but he immediately

began to think of ways it could be done – threats to the casino's management, bribes to the croupiers, some kind of device emitting... something or other – and Purpurin's weighted silence convinced him. 'You put me in a difficult position, Mr Purpurin,' he said with a sigh, feeling calmer than he had in weeks, and not just because of the early morning whiskey.

'Just Purpurin, please. And I don't see that at all, Mr Barrister. Just do as I ask and all your problems will disappear.'

'On the contrary, old chap,' Matthew said, half into his glass as he took another appreciative sip. 'Braughtigan will have already guessed my secrets. A few calls here and there and he'll have all the information he needs. So you see, you can't threaten me any more with the police. I won't do anything for you. You've failed. I believe the vernacular is that you have "blown it", sent your own plan up in smoke, as it were.' That actually felt good.

Purpurin seemed amused. 'Oh my dear Matthew,' he began, a professor correcting a student's thesis. 'Let me explain the situation to you as it stands at present. You originally refused to help me; to accede, shall we say, to my request.'

'To your blackmail,' the Minister corrected congenially.

'Call it what you will,' Purpurin continued unfazed. 'The fact remains that you turned down my offer. Last night I gave Braughtigan some suspicions; I hope that demonstrated to you how easily I can manipulate people. If I want him to find out more, he will; if I don't, he will discover nothing. Braughtigan holds the key to your future, Minister. And I control Dexter Braughtigan.'

Matthew finished his whiskey and determined to ask how that could be, how Purpurin could wield so much influence, but already he felt himself sliding away from certainty – the certainty that he could do nothing else about his situation, that the responsibility was no longer his – and towards hope. If what Purpurin said was true then this could all go away after all: no one would find out about his gambling, he wouldn't lose his job, the police wouldn't tie him into a murder case... All he had to do was agree to Purpurin's demands. Whatever they were. And having resigned himself to losing everything he knew just what that would entail, exactly how much he stood to lose. Rhetoric was all well and good but, well, one had to keep ones options open.

Ah. How much easier life would be without hope...

Uncertainly he said, 'What is it you want me to do?'

And Purpurin laughed. 'Yes, Matthew, I suppose it is about time I told you that, isn't it.'

'It's been a night for conclusions,' said Dexter Braughtigan under his breath.

‘What? What was that?’ asked the coroner, a young, lanky man, not long out of med school yet obviously already inured to the brutality of the police cases that came his way a dozen times a day. He distractedly flushed the last of the brain and skull debris from around the ruin of what had just hours ago been John Windcott’s head.

A night for conclusions. He’d put together a theory as to who’d killed Governor Mark Morton on Verum, decided that there must be someone trying to pull Minister Matthew Barrister’s strings, and worked out who had sent him to the Luxus. And they were all the same man. Moreover, not only were Oleson and his gang out of his hair for good now, but he’d also been right about them, after all these years: they weren’t thieves at all, that had just been a front.

He glanced across to the next slab where Oleson’s body had been lying twenty minutes before, now stitched back up and put on ice with a tag on its toe. Not a respectable end for such a talented man. But it was the life he had chosen. Fair enough, then.

‘Nothing,’ said Braughtigan sensing that the coroner was still waiting for him to repeat himself, and walked out of the mortuary to find the bad guy. Behind him Windcott’s diluted blood washed across the routed channel in the slab and was sluiced away.

Bev had lost a lot of blood but her type had been quickly ID’d in the police medi-unit and the temporary synthihaem solution they’d pumped into her had kept her out of shock while they got her to the hospital complex and hooked up to the real thing. They’d cleaned out the wound, actually cutting open her leg to remould the side of her thigh bone that the laser had burned through, sewn the flesh together with good old-fashioned thread – still nothing like it – and had stabilised her condition within thirty minutes of her arrival.

She, of course, knew nothing about any of this and, as she opened her eyes now to see the rising sun, she may just as well have been waking from a relaxing sleep in her rooms on the Collection. Apart from the fact that she didn’t usually keep an earnest-looking Killoran sitting at her bedside staring dolefully at her and holding her hand.

‘You can say, “Where am I?” if you like, I won’t mind,’ Adrian prompted.

Bev tried to open her mouth but it hurt her head. A vague memory stirred of pulse rifles and blazing suns. ‘Hadn’t you better,’ she began, the words rasping horribly across her dry throat. She coughed to clear it. ‘Hadn’t you better ask my father first if you want to marry me?’ she asked, weakly indicating the hand he didn’t seem to want to let go of.

‘You should be so lucky,’ he growled with a smile.

She tried to pull herself up in the bed, at once feeling the deadweight drag of her left leg but Adrian stopped her. ‘You have to

rest,' he said in the gentlest voice she'd ever heard him use.

She tried to focus. 'Did you get the Pawn?

Adrian's pause told her everything.

'*You didn't get the Pawn?*' she snapped, her voice cracking. Adrian made the usual gestures to try and placate her but she was now flapping her arms about trying to get higher up in the bed, her movements threatening to dislodge the brittle monitoring patches that had been placed on her forehead, neck and wrist. 'How could you not have got the Pawn? I assumed you'd picked it up. I was looking right at it. You saw me looking right at it.'

'As I remember it I already had rather a lot of other stuff to carry.'

'Then it's still in the hypermall,' she said, fighting the numbing dizziness rising behind her eyes.

Adrian shook his head. 'Braughtigan's got it,' he said flatly. 'Kind of.'

'What? Who the hell is Braughtigan?' But her voice was falling to a whisper now and she slumped back exhausted, feeling the darkness come comfortingly around her.

'It doesn't matter,' said Adrian. 'None of that matters anymore. All you have to do is stay quiet and get better. I'll be here.' She closed her eyes and her head sank slowly into the pillows. 'Benny will just have to look after herself this time,' he added to himself straightening her covers, and Bev let his gruff yet strangely soothing voice lull her into a deep, recuperative sleep.

Irving Braxiatel left the Luxus casino and walked out into the bright morning sunlight, adjusting the garden-fresh flower on his lapel. The early chill hadn't quite lifted out of the air and he braced his shoulders against it. To either side of the entrance the waterfalls still cascaded but during daylight hours they seemed to give the enormous building a rather tasteless air, a tackiness that belied its multi-billion credit construction and upkeep.

'Morning, Mr Braxiatel,' said an assured voice at his shoulder. 'What a glorious day.'

'Are you speaking figuratively, Detective Sergeant,' Braxiatel said without turning. He raised a hand to catch the attention of one of the valet-parking attendants far below him and began to step briskly down the marble steps. 'Or simply perhaps making a redundant statement about the weather?'

'Figuratively,' Braughtigan decided, following slowly, unhurried. 'And relatively. For example, I know a couple of local criminals who would disagree.'

'Got out of bed the wrong side, did they?' Braxiatel said absently. The attendant had acknowledged him and was in turn calling round

the old-style limousine that already contained Braxiatel's luggage.

'Woke up dead. Oh don't get me wrong, they were criminals so on the one hand it's good they woke up dead, but my point is that they wouldn't think so, you see.'

'Well indeed, Detective Sergeant. Indeed.' Braxiatel continued walking, looking about him as he went, outwardly ignoring the man behind as the distance between them stretched. Beyond the limits of the casino's grounds the city was stirring; wheels being put in motion, deals being stuck, long-term plans coming to fruition. Life.

'And take this other pair we picked up last night,' Braughtigan called after him, still making no effort to match the other man's pace. 'Terrible business. Blew out half the side of an abandoned hypermall trying to escape a rampaging killer. One of my dead criminals was involved actually,' he added as though the information would be of some genuine interest. This time Braxiatel said nothing. 'Anyway, I thought I'd come and see you about the Purpura Pawn. You remember that don't you, Mr Braxiatel.'

'I believe, Detective Sergeant,' said Braxiatel over his shoulder, raising his eyebrows and shaking his head with intolerance of the apparent non sequitur, 'that you brought it up in conversation yesterday in Mr Barrister's offices.' He was over halfway down the steps now, Braughtigan trailing languidly behind.

'Right, that was it. Well these two last night –' Here he interrupted himself to clarify. 'The demolishers, you understand, not the two dead bodies.'

'Yes yes,' put in Braxiatel to keep the man happy, almost shouting now as much to indicate his complete disinterest as to cover the metres between them.

'Okay, well these two, it turns out, had been trying to buy the Purpura Pawn. In the Hypermall.'

'Was it on sale?' Braxiatel muttered to himself. He'd almost reached the hotel's forecourt and the door of his limousine was being held open for him but he suddenly stopped and turned to face Braughtigan, curiosity evidently having got the better of him. 'Do you honestly believe any of this concerns me, Sergeant?'

'Well I don't know,' the policeman called brightly, still coming down the steps. 'Let's see shall we? One of my dead criminals is a man named Oleson, leader of a well-known group here in the city.' A dozen steps away. 'I did some checking around for the rest of his outfit. And do you know what I heard?' Braxiatel didn't give him the satisfaction. Nine steps away. 'I'll tell you what I heard,' Braughtigan continued regardless. 'I heard that two of them were looking for the third and that the rumour was the third had killed Oleson.' Six steps away. 'They were seen heading into the hypermall so I decided to take my

chances and get them on the way out.' Four steps away. Braughtigan stopped. 'That, sir, is when I met your friends.'

'Really. My friends.'

'Yes, Mr Braxiatel. A Mr Adrian Wall and a Miss Bev Tarrant.'

And Braxiatel, despite his poise and in spite of himself, let his recognition and surprise show. 'What?' he said reflexively. Then calmer, instantly recovering: 'I'm sorry, Detective Sergeant, but I really must be going. I have a tight schedule, you see.' And he hurried down the remaining few steps to the forecourt and the still open limousine door. This time Braughtigan kept pace with him.

'You know,' he said, 'at first I thought they were here to buy the Pawn for you.'

Slapping his hand down heavily on the top of the car door, Braxiatel stopped. He waited for Braughtigan to approach him and looked him dead in the eye. 'There is no connection between my visit to Earth and that of Mr Wall and Miss Tarrant,' he stated categorically, as though explaining to a child. 'The two events are entirely independent. Now if you'll excuse me.'

'But you admit to knowing them.'

'Yes yes yes, of course I know them. They are my... employees.'

'I suppose it could be plausible that your trips are unrelated. Especially when you consider the fact that came to my attention at about four o'clock this morning.'

'Fact? What fact?' Braxiatel snapped in incomprehension, his patience fraying. 'What are you blathering about, man?'

'You see the Purpura Pawn, sir, the one that Mr Wall and Miss Tarrant risked their lives to buy last night, for whatever reasons; the one that I believed stolen from the murder scene on Verum –'

'Well, what of it?'

'– is a fake.'

A short condescending laugh escaped from Braxiatel. 'Oh for pity's sake man, of course it's a fake. I have –' And then he stopped.

The silence that then fell between the two men was devastating. They stood staring expressionlessly at one another. Around them the world continued to turn but they'd both stepped off.

It was Braxiatel who finally broke the moment.

'Not many people are able to surprise me, Mr Braughtigan,' he said with a smile that was falsier than the waterfalls crashing down above them. Braughtigan's was something altogether more genuine. The good guy faced the bad. 'You, however, seem to have been able to. What a pity.'

'I think, sir, that we should perhaps take a ride downtown to my office to discuss this further, don't you?'

'Well of course. If you think that will be more comfortable.'

Braxiatel looked around him. 'You don't seem to have any transport. Might I suggest we make use of the casino's car?'

'Why not,' agreed Braughtigan and gestured that Braxiatel be allowed to get into the car first.

Braughtigan's memory of the conversation was fading.

– It was you who called me to come to the Luxus. You wanted me to see that the Minister had money to burn. You wanted me to wonder where that money came from and to assume it had something to do with the Purpura Pawn.

– How would that benefit me, Detective Sergeant?

– Well, first I thought it was because you wanted the Pawn yourself, but that of course would mean that Barrister was able to get it for you. And you see I don't think he is.

– He could have it in his office right at this moment.

– No. Because he's been too nervous for that. If he'd had it and was truly as scared as he seems to be, he'd surely have just given it to you.

– Then perhaps he knew someone who had it.

– And you were putting pressure on him to get it for you. I see. That's how my whole involvement in this started: perhaps someone in the AAA was selling to a collector.

– There you are then.

– But that doesn't quite fit, you see.

– Oh? And why not. I think it sounds rather good.

– It does. But then we have Oleson's lot showing up. You hadn't reckoned with that happening. They introduced the fake Pawn. You see for a long time I've suspected Oleson of being a forger. Everyone else thinks he's the best thief in the business: stealing select items and selling them on. What he really does is to wait for a choice item to be taken, something so high profile that no one would ever be able to admit to owning it. Or something perhaps linked with a murder. He then makes a copy, fences it, and gets it back with the help of his heavy to sell it again. Probably good for three or four sales, any more and a pattern may emerge. But he was good: I'd never seen one, until now. The Purpura Pawn being a fake made me take the idea one step further and assume that it was a red herring in the first place. Take it out of the scenario. It's not important. Forget about it. What you're left with is one man putting pressure on another man, a man who has important connections in the AAA. That man was made to look irresponsible with money. I assume if I were to pull in a few favours on the street I'd find that the Minister has some, shall we say, arrears in some establishments. And perhaps with some private businessmen also. You, Mr Braxiatel, were the man who wanted me to see that he had a cavalier attitude towards money, so it must have been you

exerting the pressure.

- Well done, Detective Sergeant.

- The only question left is why. Why are you doing all this?

- Of course I have no motive. You have no proof and everything you've just said means nothing at all.

- True. I don't know why you're doing any of this. But I'm sure that you're doing it. You have the real Purpura Pawn but that's not important. Maybe you killed Morton, maybe you didn't, I don't honestly care. What concerns me is what exactly it is that you want the Minister to do for you.

- And that, I'm afraid, Detective Sergeant Braughtigan, is something you will never find out.

Braughtigan's memory of the conversation was fading. And being sluiced away.

Six

Time is the dimension of perspective. How long had it been now since Oleson's – since his friend's – murder? Years. Too many years to count. But he always came back here, to this country, to the city, on the anniversary. A mark of respect.

Boyling hadn't continued with his trade after that awful night. He knew he was good – it had been he, after all, who had made the Purpura Pawn – but without Oleson around any more there didn't seem to be any point. He'd felt incomplete, as though the old man had died before officially telling him he was ready, that he'd taught him everything he knew, and so Boyling had left his tools behind.

Acél had travelled with him for a short time, or rather he had travelled with her because she'd had to look after him in those early days. She'd been good to him. She didn't love him but they had a connection that could never be broken and when she'd finally decided to leave he'd found he was mature enough to let her. But even so, every year he came back he hoped he would see her standing in the shadows across the street, paying her silent respects. They could have a coffee, talk about old times. Maybe start some new ones. Even at this late stage of life.

He didn't regret killing Windcott. He'd found the percussion pistol in amongst the rubble as they'd struggled. There'd been an explosion, most of a wall had disappeared. Acél had pleaded with him to let her kill Windcott; he'd thought at first it was because she wanted the revenge for herself, but he learned later, when the nightmares started, that she'd wanted to save him from the guilt. There had been some bad times. Acél would have left earlier, he was sure, had he not been so helplessly unable to cope. But he was okay now, he'd accepted his choices. And he was glad he'd shot an untidy hole through Windcott's head.

They'd left the fake Purpura Pawn on his cooling body. A statement, a final punishment, a posthumous lesson.

Windcott had had it all worked out. He'd set up a meet, independently of Oleson and the others, with some off-world woman named Tarrant. The plan had been to get a big enough score from one mark to leave Earth and establish himself on a small, backwater colony planet somewhere. His copying skills were weak but he was gambling they'd pass in a place like that. So he didn't need Oleson any more, he'd never needed Boyling, and he'd even managed to replace Acél's role by blackmailing a member of the Excise Commission, a man he was to have met with that night to straighten out the scheme: having made the deal, Tarrant would be stopped and searched on the

orbiting spacedock; narcotics would be planted on her and when she ran the authorities would have had no choice but to shoot her, leaving Windcott's man to reclaim the Pawn and so remove the evidence. It wasn't a foolproof plan, of course, but Boyling and Acél, asking around, had got the impression that if the Excise guy had known what was good for him he'd have brought the mark down himself.

But that was all over with years ago. Acél was in all probability dead now, bearing in mind her line of work, and that was the thought that periodically took Boyling to his lowest points. He was learning, however, to think of the good things.

No matter what changed around it, Oleson's old apartment building was still standing year after year but Boyling recognised the area less and less. It hadn't been his home for a long time now and remained consigned to his past and his childhood. When Acél had gone her own way, he'd moved to the continent, to what great-grandparents told great-grandchildren that their great-grandparents had still called Hungary. At first of course it had been a way of being close to Acél but after a time he'd grown to like it for itself. He scratched a living making children's toys, the old-fashioned type that didn't need power cells: wooden puzzles, puppet animals, and building blocks painted with letters and numbers and bright happy pictures.

And sometimes, when the sun reflected just so off the river or when a child smiled at the old man's gift of a toy, he was happy.

III

On Trial

Joseph Lidster

Two weeks ago...

The door opens. The two men enter. And the story starts again...

I watch from the darkness as they collapse into the room. They are drunk. Insensible.

Susceptible.

I watch...

'I'm Mark Morton! The greatest man ever to have lived!' shouts one as he clambers onto his desk. 'Bow down before me!'

The other, laughing, tries to bow. His knee gives way and he crashes into the desk. Mark falls off and collapses onto the floor.

'We need more drink, Jason!'

Jason is unable to answer. He's laughing so hard, he sounds as if he might be sick.

Mark crawls to the drinks cabinet and opens its doors.

'We've got whiskey! You want whiskey?'

Jason is still unable to answer.

'What's so funny?' asks Mark.

'You... you... falling off the table...' Jason manages to get the words out as he collapses into a chair.

Eventually the laughter stops as Mark manages to remove the bottle and pour himself and Jason a drink.

'Cheers!' Jason raises his glass.

'Cheers mate.' Mark starts to reach over with his glass but his arm has a mind of its own and begins to sway back and forth.

'No, really, thanks for this.' Jason is now quieter. Thoughtful. Maudlin. His voice rises as he continues. 'I don't know where I'd have gone. Typical me. Fight with the missus and what do I do? Do I stay and try and sort it out? No, I...'

'Jason.' Mark interrupts his new friend. 'We went through this in the bar. We're meant to be having a laugh.'

Jason stares into his drink as both men consider what has brought them here. A life of lost love. A life of stress and pressure.

I consider what has bought them here. History. Fate. Me?

Mark returns to the drinks cabinet, walking this time. He takes the whiskey and returns to Jason.

'More whiskey.' As Mark pours, Jason looks around the room.

'Nice place you've got here!'

Mark agrees. 'It's a perk of the job.'

Jason struggles to pull himself out of the chair and stand. He starts to walk, very slowly, around the room. He stops to look at the occasional painting.

Will he see it? Will he see it? Look! The moonlight is shining through the window and spotlighting it. Even the natural elements are contributing to

this tableau.

Mark looks bored.

‘Yeah. Dunno why they give ’em to me.’ He collapses into one of the chairs and nurses his drink. ‘Dunno why they expect me to... do everything.’

Go on! There it is!

‘Bloody hell! What’s that?’ Jason has seen it.

He looks at the statue. A chess piece. A pawn. Carved out of rough grey stone but with veins of rich purple running through it.

‘That, my friend, is the Purpura Pawn.’

Jason leans down to look at it more closely.

‘Oh!’ He looks confused. ‘It’s crying!’

‘It’s supposed to be... or represent... a soldier or something. I don’t know.’

Mark’s not interested. He wants to hear more of Jason’s stories of adventure.

He doesn’t want to talk about art.

For a moment, there is silence.

That’s it. Dramatic pause.

‘It’s beautiful.’ Jason whispers.

Take it, Jason. Take it!

Mark, staring down into and through his whiskey, doesn’t see Jason slowly reaching into his jacket pocket. Mark, deep in thought, doesn’t see Jason carefully removing a pistol from his jacket pocket. Mark, his heavy eyelids slowly falling, doesn’t see Jason pick up the Purpura Pawn.

That’s it. Quietly...

Suddenly, Jason drops the chess piece. Mark stirs as it chinks onto the stone floor. His eyes open.

‘Jason...?’

Jason tries to explain as Mark jumps to his feet.

‘The Purpura Prawn! You’re here to steal it.’

Mark tries to back towards the door.

There’s no escape, Mark.

Jason raises the gun. ‘There’s no escape, Mark.’

Mark backs against the wall, his eyes pleading. A tear falls down his cheek.

Beautiful. Simple and tragic.

‘Please!’

There’s no use pleading, Mark.

‘There’s no use pleading, Mark.’

Jason strides over to Mark and points the gun directly between the terrified man’s eyes.

Do it!

He starts to squeeze the trigger...

DO IT!

His knuckles whiten as he squeezes the trigger even tighter...

DO IT NOW!

Suddenly, the silence is broken as Jason starts to laugh.

‘What?’ asks Mark, confused.

‘You said Prawn! You called it the Purpura Prawn!’ Jason drops the gun, as he breaks down in fits of laughter.

‘Oh darling! Did I?’

Mark also starts to laugh. Hysterically.

‘Oh... stop... you’ll set off my asthma....’

Fools!

I storm down onto the stage area.

‘Well, congratulations. You’re managing to turn this beautiful, dramatic, dark, terrifying scene into a flaming farce!’

‘Jason’ tries to speak.

‘Prawn!’ he laughs.

I’m not laughing.

‘This is the single greatest event in our history.’ I stomp around the set, waving my arms towards the sky in anger. ‘Here! In this room our greatest leader was cruelly murdered. You –’ I turn towards ‘Jason’. ‘You are meant to be a cold, brutal assassin.’

‘Jason’ struggles to breathe as his asthma takes control.

‘Mark’ turns to me.

‘Sorry, Kris. Really, very sorry.’ Then he starts to laugh again.

I feel the stage lights burning into my neck as my anger increases...

‘Get out! Go on, get out! The pair of you make me sick!’

‘Oooh!’

‘Mark’ reaches for an imaginary handbag.

‘Call yourselves actors! You’re nothing but a pair of ignorant, lazy, spoilt... oh, forget it!’

I storm off the set and back to my seat in the dark, empty theatre.

‘Mark’ and ‘Jason’ realise that rehearsals are over for today and quietly leave. Leaving me alone with my thoughts.

Alone in the dark, cold, empty theatre.

‘Why can’t they understand?’ I whisper to myself.

‘Because, they’re not like you.’ A voice. Cultured. Sinister. Darker than the blackness which surrounds me.

I jump to my feet. ‘Who’s there?’

I look behind me at the rows of empty seats. Then I hear... no feel, him breathing. Slowly, I turn back towards the stage.

He’s standing in front of me. A black shape, silhouetted against the brightly lit stage.

‘It can be so tiresome, can’t it?’

‘What?’ My voice is shaky.

‘Controlling one’s players. Ensuring that they do what you want them to do.’

I ask him who he is. He ignores me.

‘An interesting production. *The Murder of Mark Morton*! Very... dramatic.’

Again, I ask him what is name is. Again, he chooses not to answer.

‘And I see you’re opening your little production with the murder itself.’

I explain that I think it’s more dramatic that way. I want the audience to be able to piece together what led Kane to murder Morton. ‘We know whodunnit; we just want to find out why.’

‘And you are certain that Kane killed Morton?’

‘Yes!’ I shout, my voice echoing around the empty theatre.

I can’t see his face but I can hear his contented smile.

‘But the evidence...?’

‘The evidence was faked. It had to be. Kane killed Morton and, by rights, he should have spent the rest of his life in prison!’

The man is amused. Permanently, it seems.

‘Well, that wouldn’t have been for very long then, now would it?’

I lean forward, trying to see his face. ‘If only there’d been some proof. Some concrete proof.’

The man looms over me. A dark shape with me in his thrall.

‘What if I could give you the evidence?’ he whispers.

I look up at him, unable to speak.

He drops something onto my lap. I look down at it. It’s a book. A diary?

‘What...?’ I begin, looking up.

He’s gone. As silently as he had arrived. Had he been real or had my imagination, fevered by the arduous task of directing my artistic representation of the most tragic moment of our history created a demonic angel out of the dark shadows?

The book is real.

I open it. There’s an inscription.

‘Diary of Professor Bernice Summerfield – A Life In Pieces!’

But we’ll return to that later.

Two years ago...

... on the 23 September 2645, I was sitting in the Mark Morton Memorial Bar at the Ritz Hotel. Now a confirmed teetotaler, it shames me to say that I was quite drunk. The fortieth anniversary of Morton’s death was drawing to a close and, as with each previous anniversary, I was again left with a bitter feeling that all was not right with the world. The television stations had once again showed their

retrospectives and documentaries and the current Governor had once again made his usual tribute speech to the 'man that History will never forget'. A great leader, assassinated. A man, murdered.

Yet, had anyone ever been punished for his death? Justice? There was no such thing.

Damyan, the silver-haired and silver-tongued bar-owner, knew me well. At that time in my life, he probably knew me better than anyone.

'How's things, Kris?' he asked, pouring me another glass of the old amber nectar.

I looked up into Damyan's smiling, ruddy-cheeked face.

'Not good. Franzes has gone.'

Damyan pretended to be surprised. The fact that I'd spent much of the last few months increasing his profits meant that my marriage, unlike my whiskey, had been on the rocks.

'Jeez, Kris, there's no justice in the world.'

I laughed bitterly.

'Tell me about it.'

I half-heartedly raised my glass.

'To Morton,' I said, before knocking back the drink.

My constant companionship with Damyan and his alcoholic beverages hadn't been the cause of my marriage break-up. It had merely been one of the symptoms. Franzes had never understood me. She'd never understood why I had been so obsessed with discovering the truth. The truth about Morton.

Of course, I hadn't been able to tell her the real reason. Hadn't been able to tell anyone that.

Throughout much of our short-lived marriage, I had spent hours, whole days even, poring over government documents and historical studies. On a summer holiday to Aequitas, I'd spent the first week researching in a council library while she toured local beauty spots. I think that had been the final straw for her. She had begun an affair with one of our neighbours. I had known about it and she had known that I had known about it... I suspect she had felt that it would shock me into showing her more affection. Instead, I had left her to it and started drinking. At first I had told myself that it was, again, for research. If I spent enough time in the place where Morton had breathed his last then, perhaps, just perhaps, I might find that final clue. Of course, the Ritz had changed greatly since Morton's day. Then it had been the most sophisticated, expensive hotel on Verum with regular patrons including Mark Morton, Patrizia H'nderson and Trixye Karpentar. Now it was a smoky hole, more likely to be populated by thieves and drunken historians.

'Another?' asked Damyan.

'Yeah. Go on.'

'Do you know what they don't understand?'

Damyan looked resigned as he passed me the drink.

'No, Kris,' he sighed. 'What don't they understand?'

'Morton's death. It wasn't just one murder.' I knocked back the whiskey, slammed the glass down and stuck my finger down into the sticky residue that coated the bar. Then, I began to circle with my finger. Spiralling through the scum.

'It created what we are today, Damyan! Cause and effect. Through the generations.'

The spiral got larger and I knocked the glass onto the floor.

'Sorry, sorry, sorry! You see! Even that glass! If Morton hadn't died then this wouldn't be his memorial bar and I wouldn't be here and I'd still be married and I wouldn't be here. That glass wouldn't be broken!'

'I understand.'

It wasn't Damyan who had spoken but a woman. A blurry woman, but definitely a woman. A rare breed in this bar.

'Can we talk?' She had a cultured voice. Pleasant to the ear.

I offered her the bar stool next to mine. She sat down and Damyan fetched her a drink. I tried to get her to stay in focus, then realised that I was probably staring. I gave up, not wanting to make her feel uncomfortable. She was just a woman. Did it really matter what she looked like?

'Who are you?' My usual good manners had been surgically removed by the whiskey.

'My name's Claire. Claire Marsh. Gets to you sometimes, don't it?'

'What?'

'How nobody understands.' She took a small sip of her drink. 'How nobody seems to care.'

'Sorry, love, I haven't enough money for what you're offering.'

She smiled.

'I should be offended, but I know what you're going through.' She laughed.

'You must be drunk if you think I look like a hooker.'

'Oh. Sorry...'

'So, if I'm Claire, who are you?'

'Sorry. My name's Kris. Kristoffa Tailor.'

She was starting to intrigue me.

'I couldn't help overhearing what you were saying just then. About Morton.'

I suddenly noticed something about the look in her eyes. Angry and bitter.

She continued to talk.

‘Are you looking for the truth?’

I paused then replied. ‘I used to be. Now, I’m not sure if there’s any point.’

The truth was that I had given up. Whilst I still told myself that I was desperate to discover exactly what had happened, I had started to spend more and more time there. At the bar.

She put down her drink and looked at me. She looked right into my eyes and, unblinking, held my gaze.

‘Of course there’s a point!’ she hissed. ‘We need to know. I need to know.’

‘Why do you need to know Miss...?’ I looked away, ashamed at already having forgotten her name.

‘Marsh! My name is Claire Marsh. I need to know the truth because I want to know what happened to my grandfather.’

Startled at the sudden anger in her voice, I looked back up at her. ‘Who...’

She interrupted me and her drink forgotten, she told me her story.

‘My grandfather was a policeman on Earth. He... well, he disappeared. His name was Dexter Braughtigan.’

The name didn’t ring any bells but I began to think about that old Human saying. Sins of the father and all that.

‘You remember the artefact that was stolen when Morton was killed?’

‘Of course,’ I replied. ‘The Purpura Pawn. That’s the reason the bastard killed him.’ I spat out the words. It hadn’t just been Morton’s life that Kane had destroyed.

‘That’s what I need to know. Was it Kane? The official reports said that –’

It was my turn to interrupt her.

‘I don’t care what the official reports said. It was Kane. Aequitas terrorists?’

I laughed bitterly. ‘It was just Kane. A common Human thief.’

I flushed with embarrassment as Claire looked away.

‘Oh, sorry. You’re Human, aren’t you? I didn’t mean that like... it’s not like we blame all of you. Sorry.’

Her voice was cold and calm as she replied:

‘Listen Tailor, I haven’t come all the way to the Domus System to listen to a pathetic racist...’ she trailed off. ‘I just want to know what happened to my grandfather. After Morton was killed, there were reports that the Purpura Pawn had turned up on Earth. He was investigating this when he... when he vanished.’

‘You think there was some kind of cover-up?’

She laughed at me. It wasn’t a pleasant sound.

‘Well, of course there was some kind of cover-up. There always is.

And I'm not going to stop until I find out the truth.'

I started to laugh.

'Oh, I'm sorry. Does the death of my grandfather amuse you?'

I apologised. 'No, no it's just... ironic.'

'What is?'

'Well, this is how it all started. A Human and a Citizen of Verum sat in this bar. Forty years ago...' I leant towards her and whispered, 'Of course. It wasn't the Mark Morton Memorial Bar then. Obviously. Because he wasn't dead then.' I continued to laugh.

She stood up and prepared to leave. Looking back, I don't blame her.

'I'm sorry to have bothered you, Mr Taillor. I had hoped you'd be interested in discovering the truth. I thought we might be able to work together.'

'Oh, don't go! We can work together. We can...' I struggled to find the appropriate words. 'We can uncover History's secrets!' I laughed at my own drunken pomposity.

'Goodbye Mr Taillor.'

She walked towards the door, then stopped and turned back towards me.

'Just remember one thing. History is written by the winners, Mr Taillor. Just you remember that.'

I watched her walk through the doors and out of my life. Damyan ambled over.

'Nice-looking girl. Another?' He held up the bottle.

But it was as if the smoke in the bar had cleared. Or maybe it was the smoke in my head. Suddenly, I knew that I had to continue my research. I had to finish it. Claire was right, history was written by the winners. My obsession had destroyed my marriage, most of my friendships, my bank balance... it had almost destroyed my life. And yet there I was, giving up. Spending my nights drinking and whinging.

I stood up.

'No, Damyan. No, I'm fine.'

And with that, I walked out of the bar and never returned.

Two years later, I find myself writing this book and producing the play that I hope will show the people of Verum the truth. The truth of why Jason Peter Kane killed our greatest leader.

Who am I?

My name is Kristoffa Taillor. I was born forty-four years ago here on Verum. My parents died when I was young so I grew up under the care of my ancient grandmother. I was a studious child, unburdened with friends. The other children at school knew there was something different about me. In fact, I think they knew that before I did. I

wasn't concerned at being the unpopular boy at school as I had my books. Unlike the children of today, I appreciated the importance of books and history. When my grandmother finally died, I inherited a small fortune which I used to pay myself through the University on Aequitas. Then, having gained a first-class honours degree in History, I returned to Verum and took up employment at a local museum. It was a dull, thankless job but it provided me with two things – access to historical records so that I could research into Morton's death and an introduction to Franzes Kolman. She also worked at the museum and after a brief courtship, we wed. She soon realised how dedicated I was to my research and, after her affair, left me. Ironically, it was only then that I realised how important she had become to me. I began to lose interest in both work and my research and, eventually, left my job and took up near-permanent residence in Damyan's bar. That brief meeting with Claire changed my life once more. She had reignited the old spark. She hadn't given up so why had I? I returned home that night a new man, sober and intelligent once more.

Two years later and I would now consider myself to be a detective, although most would describe me as a historian. But, what is history? Cressingham's Dictionary defines it as 'a record or account of past events'.

A narrow definition if ever there was one.

Because, when reading this, you should remember two things. Firstly, history, as Claire had reminded me, is written by the winners and, secondly, can there ever be such a thing as a true history? There are so few facts, only theories defined by sources of evidence, both primary and secondary. And if the evidence is incomplete, then the Truth is merely a theory itself. I've given you a brief history of my own life but is it complete? Of course it's not. Is it truthful? Mostly.

You should remember that when reading my story. This is my belief as to the truth. A truth based on the accounts given by the people present. The truth behind one of the most infamous events in our history – the death of Mark Morton. And the truth behind the trial of Morton's assassin, Jason Peter Kane.

Who was Mark Morton?

For many of you reading this, Morton was just a man who died over forty years ago. You'll know that he was trying to bring about peace or something. You probably learnt a little about him at school. You don't really care about what his policies were or who he was sleeping with or how his death shaped our world. For most of you, history is the past and best forgotten.

But, you should care. For the events I am about to relate to you are what made our world what it is. They made you who you are. As I

write this, the most popular song in the music charts is 'Freedom'. How many of your children know that this is an old rebel song? A repetitive dance beat has been added but the words are from a time when we fought for something. A time when we fought our Human oppressors. These days they're our 'friends', of course. But that doesn't mean we should forget. We must never forget what they did to our world. To our home.

The name of our world is Verum – an old Earth word that means Truth. But truth is something we have known so little of.

So what is our History?

Millennia ago, the Domus System was known as Ceatul. It was part of an alien empire ruled by a family of Primearchs. The entire Empire was destroyed in a war as their final leader, also known as Ceatul, fought to the death with another alien race. That may all seem rather unimportant these days, but it highlights what I will be telling you – we are born out of history. Had Ceatul not fallen, we would certainly not be here today. Following the war, the worlds of what would one day become known as the Domus System were left devastated. Empty except for the odd relic, the occasional piece of war-inspired sculpture. Empty rocks floating in space.

Empty, that is, until our ancestors arrived. Five hundred years ago, the planet Earth began its first colonisation of the galaxy. This was a time before hyperdrives, warp engines and the like. The ships that left Earth housed their crews in suspended animation as they sought out new worlds. A number of ships found themselves in this system. They landed on four of the planets and our ancestors awoke.

The original pioneers had arrived at their new home, hence the name they chose for the System: Domus. The four planets were named Generosum (meaning 'of noble birth'), Perfugium ('asylum'), Salvum ('safe and sound') and Aequitas ('justice'). The names chosen point to our ancestors' noble intentions. For many years we prospered, establishing our own customs and beliefs. We established our identities. And we lived, peacefully, for over three hundred years in our new Home. Our Domus. As the years went on, our cultures developed and prospered further, with the people of Aequitas also colonising its only moon, Verum.

Then, in a torrential wave of infestation, more Humans came. It transpired that on Earth the Human race hadn't developed into the peaceful and loving people that we had become. Instead, they had formed an Empire, a militaristic organisation that was swarming through the galaxy, trampling all others underfoot. They arrived in the Domus System to, as they put it, 'civilise' us. They could not understand that despite sharing some distant ancestry, we were

different to them. We were Salvuum or Aequum. We were no longer Human. They were arrogant and had little or no culture whereas we had traditions and beliefs that had developed over the years on our beautiful worlds.

Of course, we had no real way of fighting back.

Perfugium, Generosum and Salvum were quickly absorbed into the Empire. Aequitas held out a little longer but after a short bloody battle, the Citizens of Aequitas became Subjects of the Empress. Over the next two years, freedom-fighting organisations sprang up and started to fight back – the most prominent was Pierze Walden's AFF. Empire Adjudicators were beheaded and their homes were firebombed. The Empire eventually realised that Aequitas was not going to give up, withdrew from the planet and Aequitas became free once more. A free haven in a system of Empire-rule.

However, not all of us could regain our Aequum heritage. As part of the Agreement drawn up between the Empire and Walden's new Aequitas Government, the moon of Verum remained part of the Empire.

The people of Verum were, to say the least, not happy. Roughly half wanted to be Aequum and the remainder wanted to be Human. There were constant terrorist attacks on Aequitas and on Earth Empire worlds. The vicious fighting continued and it soon became a no-win situation. The people of Aequitas, who had initially sympathised with the people of Verum, soon lost all patience. Most people in the Empire had not even heard of Verum. It became a separate world of violence; the bombing and the killing becoming part of its culture.

Then, in 2567, a child was born to a poor mining family on Verum. From an early age, Marck Morton showed signs of great intellect. His parents worked hard to ensure that their son could visit a University on Aequitas, hoping that he would settle there, away from the violence on their own world. Like myself, though, Morton was a principled man who could never forget his home. He moved into politics, setting up the Verum Peace Party. In the 2602 elections, the VPP gained a majority seat and Morton became Governor of Verum. Morton and the VPP's policy was simple. Forget about the past. Forget about the freedom-fighting and the terrorism and the history. His policy was one of peace. He arranged endless talks between Empire Administrators and Aequitas Government officials. As a further sign of peace towards the Empire, he had even changed his name from Marck to Mark. He instigated a process that would, hopefully, lead to Verum gaining independence from the Empire and becoming part of Aequitas once more.

It should have come as no surprise that he was eventually assassinated.

The facts surrounding his murder seem relatively straightforward. On 23 September 2605 he was staying at the Ritz Hotel in Verum's capital, Millingdale. That night, as he sat in the bar, he met a Human – a man by the name of Jason Kane. Morton and Kane struck up a conversation and, for reasons unknown, Morton invited Kane to his rooms. At just before midnight Morton's secretary, Elayne H'Iggyns, heard the sound of an argument coming from the room. A hotel security guard forced the door open and discovered Kane standing over the headless body of Mark Morton. Kane was holding a needle pistol and, on seeing H'Iggyns, he collapsed. It initially seemed that Kane and Morton had had an argument and that Kane, a drunken Human, had killed Morton out of animalistic rage and anger.

Kane was arrested at the scene and driven to the Millingdale Police Headquarters. As they drove over the Lunar Bridge, though, the driver lost control of the car and crashed. The driver was killed and Kane, conveniently uninjured, managed to escape.

This was just one of many events that would cause people to suspect that there had been more to Morton's murder than a simple drunken argument.

Somehow, Kane managed to return to his ship and leave Verum. The VPP hired an SPI (a Space Private Investigator, sometimes erroneously referred to as a Space Pirate Investigator) to find him. Kane was recaptured on the planet Zardox and forcibly returned to Verum to face trial.

And that should have been it. The evidence was clear. Kane and Morton had been in a locked room and, when the door was opened, Kane was alive and Morton was dead. Kane should have been found guilty and imprisoned. This would have harmed the Empire's case, the VPP would have stayed in power and the peace process would have eventually reached its natural conclusion.

And that's what would have happened, had it not been for the *evidence* of Aequitas Security Service Agent, Monica Dagellan.

And it is, of course, common knowledge as to how the trial ended. The darkest day in our blood-soaked history.

I had already compiled most of my research when I decided that a superior way to get the reality of our history across to the people of Verum would be to reconstruct the evidence as a play. People no longer read books, certainly not historical textbooks. These days, the public want to be entertained. Therefore it's easier to get the story of History across in the form of a play or film. Thus, *The Murder of Mark Morton* was written. Due to a lack of funding, I chose to produce and direct it myself.

Then, that fateful night two weeks ago, that angel of darkness appeared with that crucial piece of missing evidence. The diary of a

Human woman called Bernice Summerfield. Before I tell you of what final clues she inadvertently gave me, let us look in greater detail as to what occurred during the court hearing.

The trial of Jason Peter Kane

‘The murder of Mark Morton is not just a tragic personal event. It may well have political ramifications for the future of Verum, Aequitas and the Earth Empire.’

Judge Roja Konelli’s opening words to the packed courtroom on 12 November 2605 showed remarkable foresight. Konelli, a Citizen of Verum in his late sixties, had been chosen to preside over the hearing by the VPP. He was considered by many to be a fair and impartial man with no allegiance to either Aequitas or the Empire. The judicial system on Verum, at that time, was simple (the VPP having abandoned the Empire’s system). Konelli would listen to evidence from the various witnesses and decide on whether Jason Kane was guilty or innocent. There were no defending or prosecuting counsels and no juries. In these politically correct days such a process would be considered unjust but, unlike today, this was a time when Verum was proud of its traditions.

The courtroom was packed with journalists and members of the public and, despite the cool lunar temperature outside, the atmosphere inside was burning with anger and sweat. Indeed, when Kane was brought to the dock, three members of the public had to be removed for hurling insults. This was, for many, the first time that they had seen the man who they felt had murdered not only a great leader but an entire peace process.

Kane was brought to the dock in chains and wearing a regulation blue prison uniform. He was a tall, well-built man in his mid- to late-thirties and apparently in good health. Witnesses, though, described his eyes as anxiously darting from side to side; it was as if he didn’t understand what was happening, as if he hoped someone would magically transport him away. He stood perfectly still and listened as Judge Konelli began his opening address to the packed courtroom.

‘Ladies and Gentlemen. I am here to determine the guilt of the man you see standing in front of you. On 23 September, Mark Morton was brutally slaughtered in his own hotel room. The accused, Jason Peter Kane, was discovered next to Morton’s body, with the murder weapon in his hands. The murder of Mark Morton is not just a tragic personal event. It may yet have political ramifications for the future of Verum, Aequitas and the Earth Empire. I assure you all now, that I will judge this case without prejudice or emotion.’

Konelli turned to Kane.

‘Please confirm your name.’

Kane, sweating, cleared his throat and then spoke.

‘My name is Jason Peter Kane.’

‘Please confirm your home planet.’

Kane looked confused.

‘Well.... I... well I live on...’

Konelli suddenly slammed his hand down, causing Kane to jump, and shouted.

‘Mr Kane, answer the question. Where were you born?’

Kane tried to regain his composure.

‘Earth.’

‘Thank you, Mr Kane. So, as a subject of the Earth Empire, you stand accused of the assassination of Mark Morton. How do you plead?’

‘Not guilty.’

Konelli looked at him over the top of his glasses.

‘Indeed.’

Konelli then turned back to the journalists and other members of the public.

‘I will now hear from witnesses who were at the Ritz Hotel on the night in question. Then –’

To everyone’s surprise, Kane started to mumble to himself.

‘What about me? When do I get to speak? I’m innocent. I need to prove it. I am innocent.’

‘Mr Kane!’ interrupted Konelli. ‘You are in contempt of court. You will remain silent or you will be removed.’

Kane fell silent and the first witness was brought in. She confirmed her name and occupation as Trasi Lyeden, a bargirl from the Ritz Hotel. Lyeden was twenty-eight years old, a Citizen of Verum and, as one reporter described her, ‘a simple girl with ample charms’. She was wearing a fashionably short skirt and had obviously had her hair done (in the style of famed actress Trixye Karpentar) especially for the occasion. She posed for the photographers and then took a seat, crossing her legs very carefully.

‘It was coming up to the end of my shift, sir. I’ve worked at the Ritz for three years now. I’m trying to save enough money to go to university.’

A member of the public sniggered but Lyeden obliviously continued.

‘It had been a busy night, sir. We’d had lots of very important people in the bar but none as important as Mr Morton. I recognised him immediately, of course as I’m a keen follower of politics.’

Konelli interrupted her. ‘Do I need to remind you, Ms Lyeden that you face imprisonment if you are found to be lying about any aspect of your evidence?’

Lyeden blushed.

‘Well, I recognised him from the television. I decided to stay and work an extra shift so that I could maybe get to talk to him.’

‘And did you?’

‘Did I what, sir?’

‘Did you get to talk to him?’

‘Well, yes. Yes, I did.’

‘And what did you talk about?’

‘I asked him what he would like to drink and he replied that he would like to drink a pint of local beer, sir.’

There was more sniggering from the public gallery.

‘Ms Lyeden,’ sighed Konelli, ‘did you speak to Morton about anything else?’

‘No sir. You see, I couldn’t. He was too busy talking to someone else.’ She pointed dramatically at Kane. ‘To that man there!’

The public gallery’s sniggering turned into shocked whispering.

Konelli slammed his hand down once more.

‘Is this true, Mr Kane? Were you talking to Morton in the bar?’

Kane jumped to his feet.

‘Yes! I’ve never denied that! This is bloody stupid!’

Konelli stared at him coldly.

‘You think cold-blooded murder is stupid?’

‘What?’ Kane was agitated. ‘No, of course I don’t. I can tell you what we were talking about.’

‘I think we’d rather hear that from an impartial witness, thank you Mr Kane. Ms Lyeden, please continue.’

‘Well, sir. They were sat at the bar so I couldn’t help overhearing some of what they were talking about.’

‘I’m sure you couldn’t.’

‘Well, basically, they were both a bit drunk and both seemed depressed. We get a lot of drunk, depressed people in the bar and it’s often part of my job to try and cheer them up. It’s like psychology, you know.’

Someone in the public gallery laughed out loud.

‘What?’ Lyeden looked confused. ‘Well... well, Kane seemed to be upset about his girlfriend. Apparently, they had had some kind of argument which was why he had come to Verum. In fact, when he first arrived in the bar he tried it on with me but I politely rebuffed his advances. I’m engaged! Look!’

Lyeden held up her hand, proudly showing off the engagement ring. It sparkled as the cameras flashed. Her happiness was evident for all to see.

Konelli coughed. ‘If we could return to the matter at hand?’

‘Yes sir.’ Lyeden continued. ‘I clearly remember him telling Mr Morton that he knew nobody here and that he just wanted to get away

from 'them' all.

Especially 'her'. Mr Morton seemed to be upset about something political, I'm not sure what. Kane insisted on buying more drinks for them both and they continued to talk. Then they started singing.'

'Singing?'

'Yeah. They were drunk, you see.'

'Really? And you say Mr Kane was the one buying the drinks?'

'Yeah. I remember because I was surprised as he looked a bit... a bit shabby. He wasn't what you'd call our usual type of customer. I mean, look at him!'

Everyone turned to look at the 'shabby' Kane. He shrugged shamefacedly.

'Would you say that Mr Kane was trying to get Mr Morton drunk?'

'Well...' her voice trailed off

'Well?'

'Well, yeah, I suppose so.'

'And then what happened?'

Lyeden explained how she overheard Kane saying that he had nowhere to stay, so Morton had invited him to stay in his rooms, there at the hotel.

'So, it was Mr Morton who asked Mr Kane to stay with him?'

'Yeah, but... well...' She left a dramatic pause before whispering, 'he seemed scared.'

'Who seemed scared?'

'Mr Morton did, sir. He was the one asking Kane to stay with him but it was as if... it was as if he didn't want him to. Do you understand?'

Konelli explained that he did not.

'I can't really explain it. He just looked nervous. I'm sure that the two of them didn't know each other before meeting at the bar but, well it was as if Mr Morton knew that something bad was going to happen.'

'Is it possible that Mr Kane was threatening him?'

'Well, I suppose it's possible.'

'Thank you, Ms Lyeden. That will be all.'

Once Lyeden had left the courtroom, Konelli turned back to Kane.

'Well, that wasn't the best of starts, was it Mr Kane?'

Kane just stared back, a look of defiance in his shifty eyes.

The next witness to be brought into the room was Morton's personal secretary, Elayne H'Iggyns, 33. Famous for being an intelligent and astute woman, she had met Morton at the university on Aequitas and had played a hugely important role in his political campaign. She didn't have the same 'ample charms' as the previous witness, so no

cameras flashed and she immediately began to give her evidence.

‘I was staying in the room across the corridor from Mark. The conference hadn’t gone well that day and we sought solace in our usual different ways. Mark liked to relax in the bar and meet the public, whereas I preferred my own company. It was so typical of him to drink and talk with anyone. He really cared about people. He...’

H’Iggyns broke down in tears and, finally, was photographed. She had always been seen by the media as a cold, unemotional creature but Morton’s death had obviously deeply affected her.

Konelli was surprisingly sympathetic.

‘I understand. To have someone you’re close to so brutally slain... it must be very difficult for you, Elayne.’

He turned to Kane but didn’t say anything. Just stared. Members of the public muttered angrily amongst themselves as H’Iggyns regained her composure.

‘It was before 23.00. I remember because my husband always called me at around 22.30 to wish me goodnight. I was getting changed into my nightdress when I heard... when I heard noises coming from the corridor. I decided to see what was going on and opened the door.’ She turned to Kane. ‘He was there, holding Mark up and staggering down the corridor.’

Again, Konelli looked over the top of his glasses.

‘Mr Kane was physically holding up Mr Morton?’

‘Yes?’ H’Iggyns looked confused.

‘So, Mr Morton was in such a state as to be described as incapable? Might he have been drugged?’

Kane jumped to his feet, shouting.

‘It wasn’t like that! We were both drunk. We were both helping each other!’

‘Mr Kane! I will not tell you again. Sit down and be quiet. Such outbursts may be permissible on your world but they will not be tolerated here.’

His anger subsiding, Kane sat down and looked resigned once more. H’Iggyns continued.

‘I asked him what was happening.’ She looked again at Kane. ‘Mark told me that that Human was a friend of his. He was going to let him stay on the spare bed in his room. I asked him if that was a good idea. He... he laughed. They both did and I remember his exact words. “No. No, it probably isn’t.” He looked frightened. Oh, Mark....’

Again, H’Iggyns broke down in tears.

‘I watched... I watched as he and Kane fell against his hotel room door. I watched as he struggled with the key and then I... I watched as they fell into the room and the door closed. It was... it was the last time I saw him alive. I was the last one to see him alive. I could

have... I should have done something!’

Konelli tried to speak but H’Iggyns continued.

‘But I didn’t know! I didn’t know that he –’ she pointed at Kane ‘– was going to kill him!’

The public gallery erupted. People shouted at Kane, calling him ‘murderer’ and ‘Human filth’. The court guards had to push them back as they tried to get to him. Konelli repeatedly slammed down his hand and called for order. The public suddenly became silent but not because of the guards or because of Konelli’s demands. Konelli, like everyone else in the courtroom slowly turned to look at Kane.

The Human had collapsed onto the floor. Lying in the foetal position, he was clutching his head and screaming. The screams echoed across the courtroom and into the homes of two thousand television viewers. One reporter described them as ‘screams emanating from the very pits of Hell itself’.

Kane’s ‘headaches’ were soon to become infamous as the most laughable part of his defence. Ask him a question that he didn’t choose to answer and he’d collapse saying that his head hurt when he tried to remember.

At that point, the court broke for lunch. Kane was given medical attention and returned to his cell. After lunch, H’Iggyns continued with her statement.

‘It must have been about twenty minutes later when I heard the noise. It was like a... like a roaring. I got out of bed and ran into the corridor. From Mark’s room I could hear the sound of a scuffle and... and then I heard Mark scream.’

‘And what did you do?’

‘I tried to open the door but it was locked, so I ran for help. I found one of the hotel security guards and he came back with me. When we returned, there was no noise. Nothing.’

H’Iggyns stopped and drew a deep breath.

‘The security guard had a spare key. He unlocked the door and pushed it open. Mark... Mark was dead.’

‘You are Mattias Gerlacht, the security guard on duty at the Ritz that night?’

‘Yes sir. It had been a busy night for the hotel and I’d had to throw out a number of troublemakers. We had a number of very important people staying and they were being bothered by members of the public. I was finally settling down to eat an egg sandwich at 23.12 when Mrs H’Iggyns approached me, crying. I’ve had extensive police training so I could tell that she was upset about something.’

Konelli looked over the top of his glasses. ‘The crying would, I expect, give that indication, Mr Gerlacht.’

Mattias Gerlacht, 42, had been a policeman on Aequitas who, three years before, had been involved in a minor scandal involving a prisoner who had died whilst in custody. The official report stated that the prisoner, a petty thief by the name of Joff Gezdeb, had sustained his fatal injuries in a fall and Gerlacht was cleared of all wrongdoing. He decided, however, to relocate to Verum and had had a number of security jobs before starting work at the Ritz.

‘I quickly ran to Mr Morton’s room with Mrs H’Iggyns. I always have a skeleton key with me, as you never know when a patron may need assistance. I unlocked the door and entered the room. Mrs H’Iggyns started to scream so I gently explained to her that we didn’t want to wake the other guests. This was now a crime scene and I knew, I knew that it must not be disturbed.’

Konelli sighed heavily once more and asked Gerlacht to describe the room.

‘It was a mess, sir. Mr Morton’s body was lying on the floor near the back wall. Without a head, sir. Mr Kane was standing on the other side of the room, holding a Human weapon known as a ‘needle pistol’. His eyes were mad with rage, sir. Mad with rage! I feared for Mrs H’Iggyns’ life, so quickly ushered her out of the door. Using my police training, I tried to calm the Human down. I approached him slowly so as not to frighten him. Like this...’

To the amusement of the gallery, the burly Gerlacht then mimed walking on his tiptoes.

‘Then, sir, he dropped the needle pistol and held onto the sides of his head. Like this...’

Gerlacht then clasped his hands over his ears and began to moan. ‘I think he was in pain.’

Konelli snorted. ‘Really, Mr Gerlacht? And was Mr Kane saying anything? You say he was moaning but were there any words?’

‘Yes sir. He seemed to be saying ‘I’ve... I’ve... I’ve’ over and over again. I could see that he was incapacitated so I jumped on him and wrestled him to the ground. He tried to struggle so I carefully held onto his neck and squeezed it ever so slightly. It’s a method I learned from my days as a policeman, sir. It seemed to do the job, as the Human stopped struggling.’

‘You strangled him and he passed out?’

‘Well, sir, yes that would be one way of describing it.’

‘Sergeant Clipperton Ridge, serial number 88819, sir!’

After overpowering Kane, Gerlacht had called the Millingdale Police. Sergeants Ridge and Dy arrived at the Ritz just after midnight.

‘Well, sir, I was directed to Mr Morton’s room. Mrs H’Iggyns was standing in the corridor and was crying. In the room, I found Mr

Gerlacht sitting on Mr Kane, who was now regaining consciousness. I asked Gerlacht if the crime scene had been disturbed. He said that it had not. Mr Kane was starting to struggle and was beginning to shout.'

Konelli asked Ridge what the Human had been shouting.

'He was claiming that this was "a set-up". It had been nothing to do with him and that he just wanted to go home. I asked Mr Gerlacht to hold the prisoner still so that I could handcuff him. Mr Gerlacht...' Ridge trailed off.

'Yes?'

'Mr Gerlacht made the prisoner... still. I handcuffed him and then my partner, Sergeant Nykolas Dy, serial number 90149, and I removed the prisoner from the room.'

Ridge then went on to describe how he and Dy left Gerlacht to guard the murder scene and carried Kane outside to their waiting vehicle. They then left the Ritz car park and drove off, towards the police headquarters.

'The prisoner was on the back seat, unconscious or so we thought. Sergeant Dy was driving and I was in the front passenger seat. As we began to cross the Lunar Bridge, another vehicle suddenly approached us. Sergeant Dy swerved to avoid it and we crashed through the barrier and into the canyon wall. That's all I can remember. When I woke up, I was in the hospital. And the nurse told me....

Konelli again became sympathetic. 'What did she tell you, Clipperton?'

'That Sergeant Dy... that Nyk had died.'

Dy's wife was in the public gallery and began to publicly cry at this point. 'He was a good man, sir. One of the best.'

Konelli was looking at Kane. 'A second death. This certainly is a tragic affair.' He turned back to Ridge.

'And how severe were your injuries, Clipperton?'

The brave and heroic Clipperton grimaced as he tried to shrug. 'Well, sir, the nurses told me that I'd been lucky. Apparently, most people die when their back is broken. I'll just... well, I won't be able to walk again but at least I'm alive.'

'And the prisoner?'

'He was nowhere to be found, sir. He'd gone. Disappeared into the night.'

'Oh, he put up quite a fight but I managed to overpower him.'

The next man to stand in the dock was Dick Strangely, a Space Private Investigator. Having only recently established its own police and judicial system, Verum was not graced with such luxuries as inter-system vessels. Unlike the glorious Empire Adjudication Service, of course. The chief of police, Boris Kulov, contacted Strangely and

personally paid for him to seek out, arrest and return Kane to Verum. A big man, sweating uncomfortably in an oversized jacket, Strangely was also noticeable for his rather large hat.

Judge Konelli asked Strangely how he had managed to trace Kane.

‘I’d been in touch with all my contacts in the Domus System and also on Earth but the accused seemed to have vanished into thin space. I couldn’t quite believe where I actually found him, your honour.’

Konelli asked Strangely where he had located Kane.

‘Well, your honour, after a particularly stressful day investigating the bars on Kenyan N, I retired to my ship and settled down to watch some TV. Luckily, I’d recently invested in the Empire’s All-Access Channel service. Over three thousand channels for just three hundred Imperials a month. It’s a bargain, your honour, and it means you get everything from Empire Gold to the Alpha Centauri Sports Network. I was flicking through the channels when suddenly there he was! Bold as anything, your honour, on a planet called Zardox. Kane was taking part in this reality programme called Celebrity Split and was with his girlfriend who apparently, your honour, is an unmarried mother.’

Konelli tutted in disgust. As did the public gallery.

‘An unmarried mother, whose child is some kind of half-breed alien thing!’ proclaimed Strangely.

Konelli tutted once more. As did the public gallery.

Kane, though, began to scream and shout like a madman. He had to be physically restrained from lunging at Strangely who continued with his account.

‘I headed to Zardox and caught him just as he was planning to flee. Oh, he put up quite a fight but I managed to overpower him. Your honour, I have years of SPI self-defence training but that man... well, he isn’t someone you’d want to get angry. He looks soft enough but on Celebrity Split I saw him single-handedly hospitalise twelve members of the terrifying Jumping Shoggoth Clan! He even offered me his woman as a bribe to let him go free. Of course, I declined his offer, ‘cuffed him and read him his rights.’

Konelli was appalled.

‘I’m appalled! So, if I can just confirm what you’ve told me. Mr Kane spent his time on the run involved with a Human woman of loose morals and appearing on an Alien media broadcast?’

‘That’s correct, your honour. Appalling, isn’t it?’

Konelli disbelievingly turned to Kane.

‘Mr Kane? A high-ranking politician is found dead and you are the main suspect. A policeman dies during your arrest and escape. And you think that appearing in a tacky low-rate media broadcast is in any way appropriate behaviour?’

The journalists' cameras all zoomed into Kane's face for his guilty close-up. 'It wasn't like that! I didn't... I didn't know what I was doing!'

Konelli shouted back at him. 'When you killed Morton or when you went on the run?'

'I didn't kill him!'

And so ended the first day of the trial.

That night the media reported on the increase in terrorist attacks in Millingdale and in other towns on Verum. Three people died in a fire-bomb attack on an Empire-run bank. A further two died when a bomb exploded in a restaurant in a predominantly Aequum area of town. A protest march outside the Ritz ended in violence. Verum's largest television news service, VBC 24, conducted a poll asking its viewers 'Is Kane guilty?'

A very clear majority of 57 per cent of its viewers said yes.

Jason Kane's Statement

On the following day, the thirteenth, the trial resumed with Konelli making a surprising announcement. 'Mr Kane. Today was to be the day that you gave your evidence. However, after much careful deliberation, I have decided not to allow this.'

The public gallery gasped.

'It is my belief that you have had too much time to work on your story and that, in the interests of justice, it would be fairer to instead listen to a recording of your initial statement to the authorities.'

Kane, shouting, jumped to his feet. 'What? This isn't justice!'

Konelli slammed his hand down. 'And if it means fewer emotional outbursts from you then the better it shall be for all of us!'

After his capture by Strangely and subsequent return to Verum, Kane was interviewed by Detective Sergeant Maree Byrd at the Millingdale police headquarters. The court listened in silence to the recording.

BYRD: The date is 16 October 2605. The time is 16.30 hours. Present in the room are myself, Sergeant Halexanda Chang and the accused. For the benefit of the tape, please state your full name.

KANE: Jason Peter Kane

BYRD: And your date of birth?

KANE: I'd rather not say.

BYRD: What?

KANE: You wouldn't believe me so what's the point?

BYRD: Very well. And your usual place of residence?

KANE: That's not important. Can we just get this over and done with?

There is a pause.

BYRD: Very well, Mr Kane. Can you describe to me the series of events that led to your being in the Ritz Hotel in Millingdale on 23 September, 2605.

KANE: Okay. Well, it's like this. I'd had an argument with Benny. That's my... well, I suppose she's my girlfriend. It was stupid really. It wasn't really about anything but in her typical Benny way, she'd lost the plot and ended up shouting and screaming and throwing things at me.

BYRD: And did you throw things back at her?

KANE: What?

BYRD: Well, would you describe yourself as a violent man?

KANE: No! I was... well, I was ducking mainly. Anyway, I decided that I'd had enough. I... borrowed a shuttle and left the Col... left where we live. I just wanted to go somewhere... anywhere that hadn't heard of Benny or Adrian or Peter or... you must know what I mean?

BYRD: Sony?

KANE: Are you married?

BYRD: I really don't think that that's any of your business, Mr Kane.

KANE: Well, you're a good-looking woman and obviously clever, so I'd be surprised if you weren't. You look very young to be a Detective Sergeant.

There is a pause.

KANE: No? Oh well. Sometimes things just get so... claustrophobic. You just want to get away from it all. We're both used to living our own lives and now suddenly we're all... settled.

BYRD: So you came to Verum?

KANE: Yeah... I'm not sure why though. I don't live near here... I must have... I don't know. It's like... I just don't know.

BYRD: For the benefit of the tape, Mr Kane is shrugging a lot. Do you remember landing on Verum?

KANE: Yep. Yeah, I remember that. I landed the flyer and decided to head for the nearest bar. To be honest, I just wanted to get completely pissed and forget about it all. I walked down a couple of streets and found myself at the Ritz Hotel. I went into the bar and... (Kane laughs) oh yeah, there was this gorgeous barmaid, Tern or Tori or... Trasi! Maybe it was because of her that I decided to stay there. To be honest, it wasn't my kind of place, a bit too posh for me, but she said she was a good listener and that I looked like a man who needed to talk. So I sat down and had a beer. Then she bought me another and... well, I had a few, anyway. She made it clear that she was up for it but I'm married. Well, sort of. I used to be. Anyway, I wasn't interested so she got a bit huffy and left me to it. Then this bloke came and sat next to me. He looked how I felt so we got chatting. His name was Mark and he was some political hotshot here. You know how sometimes it's good to talk to someone who knows nothing about you?

BYRD: No, Mr Kane, I don't. So you and Mr Morton had not met each other prior to the night of the twenty-third?

KANE: No. How could we have done? I'd never been to Verum or the Domus System before. So, we drank a lot of beer and talked a lot of bollocks. He convinced me that I should leave Benny and I convinced him that he should resign and that we'd both get into my shuttle and drink our way around the galaxy. Of course, we both knew that we wouldn't do that. Obviously. Then... well then it all gets a bit hazy.

BYRD: According to the other customers you were singing. Loudly.

KANE: Yeah! (Kane laughs) Yeah, we were singing. Oh yeah. (He sings. Quite badly) Step... slip... inside the eyes of your mind. Don't you know... (He stops singing) Oasis?

BYRD: Never heard of them.

KANE: Yeah, before your time. Then, Mark asked me where I was staying. I told him I didn't have anywhere sorted and would probably just sleep on my shuttle. I was starting to miss Benny and knew that I'd want to get an early start the next day. God, I must have been drunk. But then Mark said I could stay in his rooms. The bar was about to close but we could carry on drinking there. It seemed like a

good idea... at the time.

BYRD: So you went to Mr Morton's room?

KANE: Yeah.

BYRD: Did you talk to anyone on the way?

KANE: No. Wait, actually, yeah... yeah, we did. Some woman came out of the room opposite. Face like a slapped arse. I think she was Mark's secretary?

BYRD: That's correct. I mean about her being Mark's secretary not... you know.

KANE: She totally lost the plot with him. She was screaming at him about how he'd been sitting in the bar and getting drunk and leaving her by herself. Mark just told her to... I think he just told her to leave him alone. She asked him who I was and he said I was his mate and that we were going to drink in his room. I said she could join us if she wanted. She told me to... well, she wasn't very polite. She went back into her room and we went into Mark's. I sat down in the chair and he went to get some drink from the cabinet against the far wall. He got a bottle of whiskey and three glasses –

BYRD: Three glasses?

KANE: What?

BYRD: He poured three glasses of whiskey? Had his secretary changed her mind and decided to join you?

KANE: No... no...

(Kane's voice trails off into an incomprehensible mumble at this point)

BYRD: I beg your pardon, Mr Kane?

KANE: No. It must have been two glasses. There were just two of us there.

BYRD: And then?

KANE: Then I... something happened.

BYRD: We know that Mr Kane. What happened?

KANE: He came over with... no, no he stayed where he... and... (He then starts to sing, quietly to himself) All the things that you've seen... slowly fade away... (Kane suddenly shrieks)

BYRD: Mr Kane?

KANE: (shrieking) What? Shit! My head...

BYRD: Mr Kane? Are you okay?

KANE: (screams)

The tape then records Kane apparently collapsing onto the floor as Byrd calls for assistance. The tape is then switched off as he receives medical attention. The recording resumes thirty-seven minutes later.

KANE: The next thing I remember is suddenly Mark was dead and... and... and I had some kind of gun in my hand. But I didn't do it. Why would I? I didn't even know him!

BYRD: Please continue.

KANE: Well, then this security guard burst into the room. He was a big bugger and he just lunged at me. I didn't know... I didn't know what was going on. That woman was screaming at the door and this bloke just jumped me. He grabbed hold of my neck and was bashing my head against the floor and then... then I must have passed out again because the next thing I remember is being in the back of the police car. (Kane starts to sound agitated) But I didn't....

BYRD: Please try and remain calm Mr Kane. Jason.

KANE: Sorry. Well, it was dark and I wasn't really sure where I was. Then this big... well, this big white light just came out of nowhere and the car swerved and, God, it made some noise. And then... then I blacked out again. The next thing I knew I was back on my shuttle and setting coordinates to leave Verum.

There is another pause on the tape.

KANE: It doesn't look good, does it?

BYRD: To be honest, Mr Kane, it doesn't.

KANE: But my head... the pain in my head... I've had that before...

BYRD: One final question, Mr Kane.

KANE: Yes?

BYRD: The Purpura Pawn. Where is it?

KANE: The what? Haven't a clue what you're talking about, sorry.

Byrd then asks Kane to undergo a full medical examination. He agrees and then asks when he can leave. Byrd tells him that he won't be going anywhere and charges him with the murder of Mark Morton. Kane then breaks down in tears of self-pity and cowardice.

The Purpura Pawn

Conspiracy theorists have often asked what Kane's motivation for killing Morton would be. As far as we can tell (and, tellingly, there is very little information available about him) Kane had no real allegiance to the Earth Empire or to Aequitas. It didn't appear that he would gain anything from Morton's death. This is perhaps the biggest tragedy about the whole series of events. Kane's sole motivation appears to have been pure greed. He killed Morton so that he could steal the Purpura Pawn and probably had no idea of the potential political consequences.

Made from a grey aluminosilicate, the Purpura Pawn was nothing more than a relic from the Ceatul era. It had been suggested that the Ceatul artefacts were the only reason the Empire was keeping its stranglehold on Verum. Indeed, when one considers what happened after the trial, this theory certainly seems to be true. The Purpura Pawn was, as the name suggests, a chess piece. The purple veins running through it had been poetically described as being the dying blood of Ceatul himself. It wasn't an item of huge financial worth but it was unique, as very little of the Ceatul civilisation had survived their extinction. It was public knowledge that the ancient artefact had been donated to the Ritz by local businessman Shean Klerk and that the hotel management had displayed it in Morton's room as a gift for their honoured guest. The manager confirmed to the police that the piece had been in the room that afternoon and that it must have disappeared during Morton's assassination.

So, how did it get out of the locked room?

For me, there is only one explanation. Kane pocketed the Pawn and managed to hide it or sell it while on the run. I remembered how Claire Marsh had told me that her grandfather, Dexter Braughtigan, had been investigating a possible sighting of the Pawn on Earth. I contacted her for the first time since our meeting two years before and she confirmed that the Pawn had indeed been on Earth and that a number of Human criminals had been involved in trying to sell it on.

While it would have been improbable for Mr Kane to visit Earth before being recaptured on Zardox, it is certainly possible that he managed to pass it on to one of his Alien associates. Claire also mailed me one of her grandfather's reports about the death of a Preston R Antrim. Antrim was a shady character and it appears that he was murdered while trying to purchase the Pawn.

Braughtigan's report (the last before his own mysterious disappearance) confirmed that one of Antrim's bodyguards had been killed by a needle pistol. The same type of weapon that was used to kill Mark Morton.

The details of Antrim's death were not presented at the trial.

The whereabouts of the Purpura Pawn remains a mystery to this day.

The trial of Jason Kane continued

The courtroom remained silent as Konelli switched off the recording.

'Mr Kane?'

Kane looked dazed as he turned to Konelli.

'Yes?' he replied, quietly.

'Do you know where the Purpura Pawn is?'

Kane shook his head.

'Why did you say that Morton fetched three glasses? Were you expecting someone else to join you?'

Kane's hands shot up to his face as he grimaced in apparent pain.

'Without the theatrics, please Mr Kane.'

Kane's voice was barely a whisper. 'I don't know.'

'I put it to you, Mr Kane, that you do know. The third glass was, like everything else you said in your statement, a lie to mislead us. You state that you do not know why you came to Verum. You accuse Trasi Lyeden, a young Verum woman trying her best to improve her quality of life, of encouraging you to stay in the bar. She says that you made advances toward her. You state that Elayne H'Iggyns, a highly respected politician, screamed and ranted at you and Mr Morton like some kind of deranged madwoman. She has already told us that she only exchanged a few brief words with you. Mr Gerlacht, a security officer at the most prestigious hotel on Verum, explained how he carefully tried to calm you down yet, according to you, he stormed into the room and attacked you. Respectable witnesses, Mr Kane. Who are you? You refuse to give your date of birth or tell us where you're from. The Purpura Pawn is still missing. When will you start telling us the truth?'

At this point, Kane started to moan, apparently in pain.

'Please refrain from doing that, Mr Kane. Our medical experts have examined you time and time again. There is nothing physically wrong

with you.'

Kane collapsed to the floor, again screaming.

The public gallery began to jeer.

'It doesn't look good, does it?' shouted Konelli. 'Your own words, Mr Kane. Your own words.'

Kane stopped screaming as he fell unconscious.

'Remove him from –'

Suddenly the doors to the courtroom burst open and a woman ran in.

'Wait!' she shouted.

The cameras turned to see who it was.

It was Konelli's secretary, Natalay Amundsen. She ran up to Konelli and handed him a note.

For two minutes, nobody in the courtroom moved.

Then, Konelli turned to the public gallery and spoke.

'It seems we must adjourn today's hearing. The Aequitas Security Service has requested that I listen to evidence from one of their weapons experts. This trial shall resume tomorrow morning at 09.00.'

And, as the public gallery erupted once more and as the cameras flashed, Konelli stalked out.

The Aequitas Security Service

In 2553 the planet Aequitas regained its independence from the Earth Empire. It had taken just two years for the Aequitas Freedom Fighters (the AFF) to repel the invading Empire. Within a few months, the AFF had established a fair and democratic government. The then-leader of the AFF, Pierze Walden, became the new President of Aequitas and democracy was restored. Walden, though, feared that the Empire would, one day, strike back, and so created the Aequitas Security Service. The ASS was a secretive, some would say shadowy, organisation commanded by Walden's AFF deputy, Jahn Davees. Its exact remit was not made public but many felt that it and Davees were the true power behind Walden's government.

The last day of the Trial

On 14 November 2605, Millingdale's courthouse was packed with journalists. The previous night's news broadcasts had reported nothing else but the possibility of a last-minute reprieve for the Human who had denied Verum its future. All other broadcasts were halted as every station chose to show live footage of the trial.

Watching a video recording of VBC 24's footage is quite an uncomfortable experience. When you know what's going to happen, the dramatic music and opening titles seem so very wrong. A

mournful tune played by a lone violin accompanies black-and-white images of Morton's childhood and subsequent rise to power. Then, suddenly a red-tinted image of a grinning Kane zooms up from the middle of the screen accompanied by a bombardment of loud drums. VBC 24's most popular newscaster Zander MkDermitt then sets the scene from outside the courthouse.

'Here we are on the final day of this historic and momentous trial.'

The final day.

'Yesterday, Judge Konelli was prepared to find the Human Jason Peter Kane guilty of the assassination of Mark Morton. Then, in a surprising development, the Aequitas Security Service requested that they could present some new and shocking evidence to the People of Verum.'

The camera then follows MkDermitt into the bustling courtroom as he reminds the audience what has happened so far. As he takes his seat amongst the other journalists, the camera pans across the public gallery. Rows of faces stare out of the screen at me, oblivious of what is about to happen. Elayne H'Iggyns is there with her husband. Clipperton Ridge is there, sitting upright in full uniform. Mark Morton's mother is bravely sat at the front. Suddenly, as MkDermitt continues to speak, a member of the public jumps to his feet.

'Down with Aequitas! What right do they have to intervene?' he shouts to the others. 'Any evidence they give is just going to be false! They want Kane to be guilty so they can control us again!' He then starts to chant 'Loyalty to the Empire' over and over again before being subdued and removed by court officials

The camera then pans back across the courtroom to MkDermitt.

'As you can see, the tension here is palpable. Whatever the verdict is... oh, and the defendant, Kane, is being brought in.'

The camera zooms in, over MkDermitt's shoulder as Kane takes his place in the dock. You could almost feel sorry for him as you see the fear in his eyes. Many of the public shout abuse at him.

Then, they fall quiet as Konelli enters. He takes his seat and looks across the hushed courtroom.

For what seems like an eternity, there is silence. Then, he clears his throat and begins to speak. He tells the court that he will not prolong the trial further than he must but, out of respect to their close friends on Aequitas, he will allow the ASS agent to present her evidence. He introduces Doctor Monica Dagellan. With no make-up and her red hair tied back into a severe ponytail she appears every inch the detached scientist.

'My name is Doctor Dagellan and I am Aequitas's foremost expert on weapons technology. The evidence I have to present is not what I would have chosen to present. It is, however, scientific fact.'

The camera zooms into her face for a close-up. She looks quietly angry. Then the camera shakily zooms back out as she holds up a gun.

The needle pistol.

‘This is a Human weapon. It’s called a needle pistol. It is basic but effective and deadly. It fires a single laser that can burn through metal, glass, wood and, of course, through skin and bone. This is the needle pistol that the Human Kane was holding before his arrest by the Verum authorities. It is the weapon that we have all believed caused the death of Mark Morton.’

There’s a dramatic pause before she resumes her speech.

‘However, it is entirely impossible for Morton to have been killed by this needle pistol.’

The public gallery erupts once more and Konelli calls for silence.

‘Doctor Dagellan, if you could continue.’

‘By all means, sir. If you don’t mind, I’d like to demonstrate the weapon’s abilities.’

‘By all means, Doctor Dagellan.’

Dagellan’s assistant then brings out a mannequin. He places it in front of a window, across the courtroom from the Aequitas expert. Then, as every single person in the courtroom leans forward, Dagellan fires the laser.

Its effect is devastating. The lime-green beam shoots across the room and through the mannequin. The mannequin is completely destroyed, as is the window behind it.

After the sound of destruction fades away, Konelli asks what this proves. ‘Sir, Morton’s head was indeed completely vaporised.’

At this point, Morton’s mother can be heard sobbing in the gallery.

‘However, there were no laser burns on any wall or indeed on any surface in the hotel room.’ The room in which Morton was killed was less than half the size of this room. Had Kane indeed shot Morton, the needle pistol’s laser would have vaporised Morton entirely. It would also have destroyed whichever wall Morton was standing in front of. Indeed, with Morton’s room being on the ground floor, it could have easily provided Kane with an escape route from the Ritz. It is the belief of the Aequitas Security Service that it would have been impossible for Kane to have killed Morton with this needle pistol without destroying much of the hotel room itself.’

The camera pans across the public gallery as people jump to their feet shouting. They are so angry that when the camera pans back to the usually unflappable MkDermid he looks terrified.

‘If you’ve just joined us, an Aequitas Security Service Agent has just given evidence that apparently proves an Empire subject’s innocence! It’s completely mad. The public gallery is... well, as you can see, chaos has broken out. I... and... and, yes, Judge Konelli is calling for order.’

The camera turns back to Konelli, the image shaking as the cameraman is knocked by the people fighting next to him.

Konelli barks for order. Gradually, silence descends.

‘Doctor Dagellan, this is indeed... well, it’s a surprising turn of events.’ The flame-haired doctor turns to Konelli with a look of pure anger in her eyes.

‘Believe me, sir. This evidence isn’t given lightly. However, Commander Davees believes that justice must take priority over all political disputes with the Empire. Kane is, unfortunately, innocent.’

Konelli thanks Doctor Dagellan who then quickly leaves the courtroom. Kane collapses onto his knees, crying as Konelli begins his final quiet address to the court.

‘Jason Peter Kane. You are...’ Suddenly he loses all self-control and angrily shouts, ‘Kane! Stand up and look at me!’

Kane stands up and stares at the judge with a look of defiance.

‘Yes, your honour.’ He spits the words out, no doubt looking forward to his future with his Aliens and his whore of a girlfriend.

Behind him, I can see the tortured face of Elayne H’Iggyns. Her whole life crashing down around her.

‘Jason Kane, it is my belief that you were involved in the murder of Mark Morton. However, this new evidence means that I have no choice but to release you. You will be required to stay on Verum as the investigation into the theft of the artefact known as the Purpura Pawn continues. But the court hereby finds you not guilty of the murder of Mark Morton.’ Konelli then turns to a court official and orders him to free Kane.

Fighting breaks out in the public gallery once more as the camera returns to the shocked Zander MkDermitt.

‘I can’t believe it! Kane has been freed on a completely ridiculous technicality! Who knows what this could result in? The fighting behind me is surely just the tip of the proverbial iceberg.’ MkDermitt then looks to Kane and then back at the camera. He jumps over the barrier and runs towards the strutting Human.

‘Jason! Jason Kane!’

Kane backs away. ‘What? What do you want?’

MkDermitt grabs hold of him. ‘I just want you to tell the people of Verum what you’re going to do now.’

Kane looks confused. Then, he passionately shouts into the camera, struggling to make his voice heard over the fighting.

‘You want to know what I’m going to do? I’m going to leave here! I’m going to leave your stupid little world and get back to the woman I love. I’m going home!’

He then lunges past MkDermitt as he tries to make his escape.

Elayne H’Iggyns can then be seen running towards him, screaming.

MkDermid turns back towards the camera.

‘Dramatic scenes as...’

He’s cut off as Elayne H’Iggyns’ face fills the screen.

Then, there is a flash and the screen goes black.

I think of those last images as the VBC 24 logo appears on the screen and a continuity announcer speaks.

‘We apologise for the loss of transmission from the Milling... what? What? Erm... it appears that... it isn’t a technical fault. We’re receiving reports that... oh my God... it seems that there was some kind of .. explosion in the courthouse. What? Ladies and Gentlemen, I can confirm that there has been an explosion inside the Millingdale Courthouse. We have a reporter...’

The logo suddenly disappears and the black screen is replaced by a thick grey fog. The image shakes and it’s difficult to make out what I’m looking at. Then, the fog starts to clear. A VBC 24 reporter is standing in the street, her eyes full of tears and her clothes covered in blood.

‘My name is Sali Mentrese. I... I’m outside the Millingdale Courthouse. I’m... oh God, it’s gone. It’s been completely destroyed. I...’

Her voice trails off as the fog clears and the screen shows perhaps the most shocking and upsetting image that our blighted world has ever seen.

The courthouse has been completely destroyed. Smouldering metal girders stick up through the smoking rubble. Body parts are scattered across the ground. Arms, legs... to the left of the screen there’s what appears to be a woman’s decapitated head. It’s on fire. The blood that surrounds it is bubbling as it boils. Young, pretty Sali Mentrese tries to speak.

‘I was... I was outside the courthouse... I’m... oh God!’

The screen goes black as Sali continues.

‘We’re... apparently we’ve lost picture but... there’s no one.’

Sali starts to cry.

‘There’s no one. Where is everyone? They can’t all be... Oh God, they’re all dead.’

Extract from the Diary of Bernice Summerfield

I’m too late. He’s gone. Jason is gone.

Fall-out

Sali Mentrese was right. They were all dead.

The Verum emergency services were at the scene within moments. Both Aequitas and the Empire temporarily put aside their differences

and provided what assistance they could.

But any assistance was redundant.

Judge Roja Konelli was dead. Elayne H'Iggys was dead. Clipperton Ridge was dead. Zander MkDermitt was dead. Monica Dagellan was dead. Mark Morton's grieving mother was dead. Jason Kane was dead.

Nothing remained of the courthouse except for burning rubble and burning corpses.

One hundred and thirty-one lives had been snuffed out.

The explosion reverberated throughout Verum. Husbands lost wives. Wives lost husbands. Children lost parents. And the political situation on Verum was changed irrevocably.

The investigation into the explosion did not take long. Amongst the rubble and the bodies were found elements of an explosive called ketrolycine a substance commonly used by terrorists loyal to Aequitas.

It therefore didn't take long for the Aequitas and Empire investigators to connect the dots. The official conclusion was that, as per Konelli's judgment, Kane had been innocent all along and had indeed been framed. Mark Morton was murdered by Aequum terrorists who, realising that the Aequitas Government were then presenting evidence to prove Kane's innocence, tried to destroy any trace of their involvement being revealed by blowing up the courtroom.

Although this may seem ridiculous, what with Morton and the VPP wanting the same result as Aequum terrorists, it does actually make sense. There were many Aequitas supporters who didn't approve of what they saw as Morton's 'cowardly passivity' and if the bomb had exploded before Konelli's judgment then most people would still have believed in Kane's guilt. This would, of course, then have covered up the terrorists' involvement in Morton's murder.

After the horrific events, emotions ran high on Verum, Aequitas and on Earth itself. All three states had lost people in the indiscriminate explosion and there were fears that the bombing could cause all-out war. A war which would have been hopelessly one-sided.

And so, on 1 December 2605, the Aequitas Government renounced all ties with Verum and, on 2 December 2605, a fleet of Earth Empire ships arrived. The VPP was immediately disbanded and a Human governor was installed. It seemed that the Aequum terrorists' plan had completely backfired with President Walden announcing that Aequitas no longer wished to be associated with the 'animalistic criminal society that Verum has become'. The message to the people of Verum was made even clearer by the arrival of Empire representative, Matthew Barrister:

'Verum is a member state of the Earth Empire. Our friends on Aequitas have recognised this and, now, the citizens here must

recognise this. There will be no more fighting. There will be no more violence. There will be no more anything. Any terrorist action will result in a military response. The people of Verum will know what peace is.'

He also announced that reparation would have to be made to the Empire and to the family of Jason Kane for his brutal murder by Verum citizens. Barrister personally oversaw the removal of Verum artwork and other precious artefacts. Anything that remained from the Ceatul civilisation was taken and loaded aboard his private ship, the Galloway.

Then, on 2 January 2606, EEBC 24 viewers sat down to watch the news.

Again, watching this, with the knowledge of what is about to happen, is difficult. Barrister and his crew are shaking hands with the new Human governor of Verum. Empire soldiers ensure that there are no protests at the spaceport, but the atmosphere is tense. For many on Verum, this was blatant theft. As our culture was being subsumed by the Empire, here they were actually stealing our art, our history.

Barrister turns to wave to the cheering crowd as the final artefacts are loaded onto his Empire logo-emblazoned ship. He then climbs aboard and the ship takes off. The Empire guards ensure that the crowds keep on cheering as the ship soars up into the atmosphere.

The cheering stops, though, when, suddenly, the Galloway mysteriously begins to glow red. Barrister's voice can be heard over the spaceport's communication system:

'What? The artefacts... you hear me... to Spaceport contr... something... gone...'

And, then the glowing Galloway explodes. The crowd watch in silence as pieces of wreckage, burning bright, begin to fall towards the ground. Someone in the crowd cheers.

An Empire guard shoots him.

The screaming starts.

And the first of oh-so-many riots begins once more. Started by a death and ending in many more. This was, this is, life under Empire rule.

This is their peace.

And this is why Mark Morton was the most important man in our history. Had he not died, we would now be a world of peace and prosperity instead of an Empire-ruled, riot-stricken society. What people find so hard to believe is that this most important man, this charismatic and wonderful leader could be killed by a drunk, opportunistic thief. That the actions of one man, Jason Kane, could make such a difference to our world seems inconceivable. This is why

conspiracy theorists point to the third glass in Morton's room, the light flashing in Dy's eyes as he drove over the Lunar Bridge, the bombing, the odd decision about giving the Ceatul artefacts to Kane's family, the disappearance of the Purpura Pawn. They accuse the Aequitas Security Service, the Earth Empire, even the long-dead Gods of Ceatul, of orchestrating a terrible conspiracy because they cannot accept the fact that a drunk Human just happened to meet a great leader in the bar. They cannot accept the fact that Kane killed Morton just so that he could steal a worthless historical artefact. They cannot accept the fact that everything that happened, from the murder, to the bombings, to Aequitas pulling out of Verum, to the Empire instigating martial law, was all just a series of events that arose out of choices made by individuals.

That was to be the conclusion of my story. Kane killed Morton. He stole the Pawn and passed it on to his Alien associates who then tried to sell it on Earth. Kane was freed on a ridiculous technicality (who knows how close he was standing to Morton? Or what setting he had the needle pistol on?). Then, the terrorists struck once more and destroyed any chance of us gaining our freedom.

Then, I read the diary of Bernice Summerfield. In many ways her story mirrors my own as, forty years ago, she too searched for the truth. She wanted to find out the truth behind her lover's arrest and trial. Instead, she found out the truth about her lover.

And the truth about me.

The truth behind the lies or more lies behind the truth?

The door is flung open. Two men crash into the room. And the same old story happens again.

I watch them as they drunkenly collapse into the room. Completely pissed.

'I'm Jason Kane and I'm the King of the World!' shouts that delightful man of mine as Adrian has to practically carry him into the room.

'Where do you want him Benny? On the bed or on the floor?'

'What the hell happened?' I ask, ignoring his drunken innuendo.

Adrian looks at me with what is, quite honestly, a particularly sinister smile.

'Well, you said you wanted me and Jason to get to know each other better. So I invited him out for a few drinks with me and the lads.'

'Adrian!'

'Hey, Benny, it's not my fault if he can't handle a few small pints of Killoran Ale.'

I remind him that Killoran Ale isn't at all suitable for human consumption.

On the grounds of it being practically 100 per cent proof.

'Really? Well you learn something new every day.' Adrian starts to laugh.

'Honestly, Adrian. You're as bad as he is. Just put him in the chair and go home.'

Adrian swings Jason round and drops him into an armchair.

'Quietly! You'll wake Peter!'

'Sorry!' Then, heading towards the door, he again starts to laugh.

'What's so funny, Adrian?'

He falls into the doorway and then turns himself around to face me. He's in almost as bad a state as Jason.

'When he wakes up, remind him that he's meeting Kai tomorrow morning.'

'Kai?'

'Kai Berpass, my best bricklayer.'

'Dare I ask why?' I already suspect what the answer's going to be.

'Well, after a couple of pints, Jason said some things that didn't really go down too well with Kai. When Kai very very politely asked him to take back what he said, Jason challenged him to a boxing match. He said something about Queensberry Rules. They're meeting tomorrow morning in the Trianon.'

I consider my ex-husband's chances against the eight-foot-tall Killoran.

'No, they're bloody not Adrian. Goodnight.'

'Night Benny!' he calls, sauntering down the corridor.

I close the door behind me and turn to the man I plan – planned – on spending the rest of my life with. He looks up at me weakly and tries to speak.

'Benny. I... I...'

I interrupt him. 'Forget it, Jason.'

'I don't feel well.'

'I'll fetch a bucket.'

(It's worth nothing that even in this opening page of Summerfield's diary, we're getting confirmation of Kane's incessant drinking and violent tendencies. Is it any wonder he 'suffered' such terrible headaches?)

I always promised myself that, no matter what happened in my life, I'd never be the kind of woman who would say 'Men!' with the audible exclamation mark but... well... Men! 'Oh, it's okay Benny, we can change. We promise not to argue about Peter or about you anymore. We're going to be friends etcetera etcetera.' Then what do they go and do? Find new and supposedly cunning ways to try and get at each other. Whether it's Jason releasing dog fleas at one of the building sites or Adrian getting Jason completely plastered... Men!

It would be enough to drive a weaker woman to drink.

So, that's what happened last night. Now, do you think it's unreasonable of me to have a word with my darling Jason about it? No, I don't think so either. He would disagree though. Apparently it's entirely unreasonable of me to request that, firstly, he tries to end this feud with Adrian and that, secondly, he tries to stop coming home at four in the morning and throwing up on the shag pile. Apparently, by bringing this to his attention, I'm turning into a nagging bitch (or words to that effect).

We had an argument. A pretty bad one: 7.8 on the Richter scale. Doors were slammed and crockery was broken. Now, usually the one good thing about a fight with Jason is the making up afterwards. Only, this time we can't even do that. He's bugged off somewhere. He stormed out, nicked one of Brax's flyers and disappeared. Still, I suppose it'll be nice to have a bit of peace for a while. I can spend some quality time with Peter.

Okay, Jason's been gone a couple of days now. Not that I'm worried or anything. Spoke to Brax about it and he did his usual wonderful job of calming me down. He's also heading off somewhere and has given me a very science-fictiony communicator so I can let him know when Jason gets back. Me and Peter have spent the morning using it to pretend we're in Star Trek.

Right, he's now been gone for nearly a week. I guess he just wants some time by himself. Last time I did that though, I ended up fighting Killer Robots and Evil Corporations. You see, we're not really the type of people who can have pleasant uneventful off-world jaunts.

Well, he's back. He's got some interesting new bruises (supposedly from a bumpy landing in the flyer – yeah right!). We made up in our usual way and he's asked me to go with him to some ultra-exclusive fancy holiday planet called Zardox. He says that now we've both had holidays apart from each other, he thinks we should take one together. Like real grown-ups. I told him that we still Needed To Talk, though. He's terrified! Haha! Nice to know that, after everything we've been through together, I can still wind him up.

(Summerfield's diary then details the improbable and unbelievably hedonistic time she and Kane spent on Zardox. It's not relevant to his murder of Mark Morton so I have decided not to present it here. One does become clear during their time on Zardox though, is that both Summerfield and Kane appear to live a life that revolves around sexual intercourse, heavy drinking and unnecessary luxury. A lifestyle I find quite abhorrent. We rejoin her account just after Kane's arrest by Strangely.)

Oh great. Fantastic. Wonderful.

Jason's been arrested.

How utterly superb!

I really thought things had changed between us. After everything we went through on Zardox – after everything we'd talked about – I was convinced that things had finally changed. That he'd changed. He hadn't told me about where he'd recently disappeared to but he had promised (or threatened!) never to leave me again. Of course, he's said that before and then promptly buggered off to another dimension but this time, this time I really thought we'd finally got it all sorted.

But, of course, with the universe being what it is and with Jason Kane being who he is, he had to go and prove me wrong. It turns out that on his little jaunt away from the Collection, he'd only gone and got himself embroiled in the murder of some politician on some godforsaken dust bucket in the middle of nowhere. Now, I can't really blame him for that – after all, the same thing's happened to me on more than one occasion. But why didn't he tell me???

I tried to contact Adrian to check up on Peter and to explain what was happening. Turns out Adrian has disappeared with Bev and has left Peter with Clarissa Jones. Which has pissed me off even more. With Jason I've come to expect a complete lack of commitment but I can usually trust Adrian to... well I was going to say 'do as he's told' but that makes me sound like a right cow. I guess I mean that it's not like Adrian to run off and dump Peter with someone else. The poor kid isn't going to know who his parents are. I told Clarissa that I'd come back to the Collection.

'Don't be silly, Bernice' she responded in that annoyingly calm way of hers. 'Peter is perfectly safe with me. You need to help Jason.'

The thing is, I'm not as young as I used to be. Gone are the days when I could just drop everything and get myself embroiled in some ridiculous and dangerous situation. I've got Peter to think about now. I can't just... but then Clarissa reminded me of something.

I also have Jason to think about.

I love him. I mean it though, I really love him. Right now, I love him more that I ever thought it was possible to love anybody. Okay, so he's never going to be Mr Perfect but then neither am I (although I was once – long story!). Honestly, though, I haven't always treated him as well as I could have done. He's done so much and yet... I remember a while back we were embroiled (there's that word again) in some adventure or other and he said to me, 'I'm not your assistant.' But sometimes that's exactly how I have treated him. I've just dismissed him as Jason Bloody Kane. That bloke I can't live with but can't live without. That bloke who's shagged half the galaxy and who gets himself involved in dangerous situations involving death and destruction on a near-daily basis. A lovable rogue. A charming git. But he's not just that at all. He's one of the most human people I have ever

known.

And I know I'm never going to be Mother Theresa, but I don't want to be that bitch that he once accused me of being. That really hurt. But, then, the truth often does, doesn't it? The fact of the matter is that, despite how I sometimes treat him, he loves me. And, despite how he treats me, I love him. And, one day, we will be married (again!) and we will be happy. And we will grow old with our kids and sit around a fire, wearing tartan slippers and reminding each other of our sordid pasts.

There's so much more to him than just 'Jason Bloody Kane'.

(An ironically apt conclusion for Summerfield to reach.)

So, anyway, Clarissa's right. I can't just leave him. I'll go and rescue him but I'll certainly be having Stern Words with him. And with Adrian for doing a runner. And with Bev for... well, for getting involved. Right, I think I'll give Brax a call.

Well, cheers Brax!

'Don't worry,' he says. 'I'll get people to look into it,' he says.

Now I had hoped that by 'people', Brax had meant his best, most intelligent and downright sneaky lawyers. No, silly me. He actually means Bev and Adrian. A thief and a builder! And guess what? He's sending them to this Verum place to rescue Jason and wants me to return to the Collection. Not bloody likely!

So, after much deliberation I've decided to go to Verum myself. Clarissa is looking after Peter so he'll be fine. And.... well, as I said, I love him.

Well, I've managed to locate it. Turns out it's a moon (with a naturally breathable atmosphere which I would have thought meant it was a planet but I was never the expert on such things) in some place called the Domus System. It's in the middle of bloody nowhere, so heaven knows why Jason went there. I'm on my way now, so excuse the illegible handwriting – it isn't what you'd call a smooth ride. In the meantime, I've managed to find out a little about the System's history.

Basically, the people there are human. They're all human but some of them don't want to be. Verum orbits a planet called Aequitas. All the other planets in the System are part of the Earth Empire, except for Aequitas. Verum, though, is also part of the Empire and the people on it are fighting over whether to stay part of the Empire or whether to return to being part of Aequitas. Or something. It all seems a bit silly and pointless really. Perhaps it's just because I've called so many places 'home' in the past, that fighting over what you're classified as just seems daft and unimportant. That might seem hypocritical after what we all went through during the Occupation but that was different. Verum is going to be no different whoever runs it. It's not a

case of it being invaded and people being tortured and killed. Not like it was with us. I mean, I'm no fan of the Earth Empire (and I've seen where it's going to end up – not good!) but it seems to me that the situation on Verum is completely out of control. Lots of people using their 'patriotism' to justify dealing drugs (to finance their cause) and beating the crap out of anyone who doesn't agree with their beliefs. Sometimes, I don't think I understand humans at all.

Goddess, I so sound like Brax!

Coming in to land so more later.

I decided not to land at the Spaceport but managed to find a quarry just outside the main city, Millingdale. It was an hour-long walk after that but I'm in Millingdale' now. And Goddess, it's a grim place. Dusty and dirty and downright smelly. I didn't really know where to start looking so I headed towards the centre of the town. Figured that the local police station would be the best place to begin.

I didn't even make it there. I was about to ask a local if they'd heard of Jason Kane or Mark Morton when suddenly I found him.

There was his face on a twelve-foot-square poster! Only, the artist had digitally added some fetching devil's horns. The words 'The Trial of Jason Kane – live on VBC 24! Starts Tomorrow!' were written across the bottom of the picture. It appears that my ex-husband and possible husband-to-be has once again become something of a celebrity. Despite this, the situation couldn't be *more* different to Zardox.

I decided there and then that making my connection with Jason known would probably not be a good idea. Instead, I bought a local newspaper and found a pub. And I read about how the man I loved had killed a man.

It was there in black-and-white and was all very John Dickson Carr. He'd been found in a locked room with a dead man. And he'd been holding the gun. It was really quite simple. And therefore, completely and utterly ridiculous. Jason might be many things but one thing he isn't (despite however many times I've told him he is) is stupid. If, for some terrible reason he'd had to kill someone, in self-defence for example, he wouldn't have allowed himself to have been caught like that. I remembered how he'd been able to run rings around the Fifth Axis (and, for a short while, around me) during the Occupation. It just didn't make sense.

Why had he come here? Why had he met this Morton bloke? Why had he gone to Morton's room? The newspaper report also told of how Jason had somehow managed to kill a policeman and escape – and of how he had then been recaptured on Zardox. No mention of me, though. Don't know whether to be relieved or disappointed.

Like all the good detectives, I decided that the best place to start would be at the scene of the crime – at the Ritz Hotel. Luckily, Verum still used Imperial currency and Brax had set me up with a large account a few months before. The Ritz was easy to find, what with it being the biggest and grandest hotel in Millingdale. It was huge. Like, really huge. The size of the Collection huge. And not my sort of place at all. Very posh. Brax's account meant I had no problem getting myself a room although the receptionist didn't seem too keen. Apparently they don't get many of my 'sort'. I dunno whether she meant women or humans or archaeologists or scruffy-looking human archaeologists who trip over randomly placed suitcases on the way in and swear a lot.

And it's not Jason's sort of place at all. He just wouldn't have chosen to come here in a million years. I'm really starting to worry about this, you know. There are just too many little, niggly things that aren't right. Still, I'm going to head down to the bar and see what I can find out. Wish me luck!

Blimey! Well, that was interesting.

Firstly, the prices here are ridiculous. I mean, really ridiculous. Beer is not meant to be that expensive. It's just not right or fair. Thank the Goddess for Brax's credit account though. I'm completely pissed a little tipsy.

Secondly, never mind the paddle, Jason is up the proverbial creek without a boat. He hasn't just become a celebrity – he's become the Devil! I went down to the bar in my best 'nondescript' clothes. I usually have an ability to stand out a little. Jason tells me it's because I'm 'bed-wetingly sexy' or (when we're having an argument) because I've got a 'big gob'. I like to think it's a bit of both. Tonight, though, I decided to go undercover. Try and find out some information without getting myself lynched or arrested or stoned.

So, I just sat there for a while and quietly had a couple of pints. There were lots of journalists around but I managed to keep out of their way. There were enough people looking for their fifteen minutes so that wasn't too difficult. I managed to get talking to the girl behind the bar. Her name was... dammit, can't remember her name. Huge breasts though. Which would have been a perfect encouragement for Jason to stay in this particular bar.

Sorry, that's not fair on him. From now on, I, Bernice Surprise Summerfield am going to stop doing that. No more 'Jason Bloody Kane'-isms.

So, I managed to get her talking. Actually, the problem was getting her to stop. In the interests of fairness I'll try and transcribe what she said to me:

Like yeah, like I was working that night cos we were busy cos of the conference or somefink. And, like yeah I was talking to that Kane bloke for ages. Like he was well fit. Totally gorge, yeah. No but right and like he said he'd argued with his wife or somefink and –

No, sorry, can't do it anymore but you get the picture. She wasn't exactly going to win any awards for eloquence. Basically, the Girl With Huge Breasts had tried to chat Jason up. But, guess what? HE WASN'T INTERESTED!! Ha ha! Do you hear that? He wasn't interested! The 'well-fit' bloke only had thoughts for me. I got the impression that this hadn't gone down well with Trasi (just remembered her name!) and that she was more upset about this than about what had happened later that evening. She certainly wasn't too complimentary about Jason. She said that she'd only been trying to cheer him up but that he had 'turned nasty'.

Come on, this is Jason we're talking about! He doesn't turn nasty with drink. He turns Dopey and Sleepy and that sadly missing eighth dwarf, Randy. Anyway, she'd basically left him alone after he had 'threatened to black my eyes out or somefink'. Which, obviously, Jason wouldn't do because a) he's a decent human being and b) because of what his dad had been like.

(Summerfield seems to have already forgotten about the first passage in her diary Kane being returned to her by the Alien, Adrian Wall, after challenging someone to a fight whilst under the influence of alcohol. The comment about 'his dad' is also interesting. I take it to mean that his father was a violent man and that Summerfield believes that this means that Kane would therefore reject violence. Of course, psychological and sociological studies performed by experts have shown that sons of violent men often become violent themselves. The sins of the father...)

So I asked her if she'd seen Jason talking to Morton. She said that she'd seen them talking but hadn't heard much of what they were saying as she was 'scared for my life like'. She had heard Jason talking about having had an argument with his girlfriend and she had heard them singing. Then they had got up and left. She said that Morton had paid the bill, had thanked her for her service and that he had then helped Jason out of the bar.

'The Human had got like disgustingly drunk.'

'Sorry? Jas– I mean Kane was in a worse condition than Morton?' I asked. 'He was so drunk that he had to be carried out of the bar?'

At that, Trasi suddenly went very, very white and looked very very scared. 'Yeah, I mean, no. No, that's not right. Morton was drunker. That Human carried him out.'

I laughed politely. 'Oh, I thought that's what you must have meant. Can I get another pint, please?'

So, the big-boobed barmaid was lying! And she was scared. Very

interesting... and yes, I am actually stroking my chin as I say that.

After a few more pints I then decided to call it a night. I wanted to be in the public gallery for the first day of the trial and, according to Trasi, tickets are 'selling like hot cakes'. Well, I'm so glad that we're all taking this seriously.

So I returned to my room, watched a tacky reconstruction of Jason killing Mark on the news and then suddenly realised that I should let Brax know where I am. He wasn't too happy. In fact, he was really, really unhappy. He said that he'd been in touch with Adrian and Bev and that they were on their way to Verum. He was also working on getting Jason legal help and that I was putting myself in unnecessary danger. Me? Put myself in unnecessary danger? Shurely shum mishtake. I changed the subject and asked him how Peter was. He said he wasn't back at the Collection yet, but when he had last spoken to Clarissa she had informed him that everything was perfectly fine. He then tried to persuade me to leave Verum but I told him that I wasn't leaving without Jason.

I really miss him. And Peter. It seems like months since I saw my son.

I hate empty hotel rooms. I hate lots of things and

I really really hate how unfair this all is! Why should people like us constantly keep getting embroiled and involved and everything! Why, just for once, can't me and Jason just be left alone?

I MUST HAVE BEEN A RIGHT BITCH IN A PREVIOUS LIFE TO DESERVE THIS!!!

Morning. Ouch. It even hurts to write. Yes, I was drunk last night in case you couldn't tell. It wasn't good drunk though it was block-it-all-out-and-try-and-forget-everything-drunk. Which, of course, never works and you just end up feeling even worse. It's also something I haven't done in a very long time which probably reflects my concerned state of mind more truthfully than the Summerfield-patented flippant tone. I'll feel better after breakfast.

Well, I still didn't feel great after breakfast but by lunchtime I was feeling even worse. I disguised myself and then headed for the courthouse. I didn't want Jason to see me in the public gallery and call out to me, so I got a blonde wig and some sunglasses which surprisingly seemed to do the trick. I think I could have been dancing in front of him naked, though, and he still wouldn't have recognised me. He looks terrible. Really really terrible. He's lost weight and he looks like he hasn't slept in weeks. I think the bastards have been torturing him too.

(Summerfield is ascribing Human customs to us. The Verum Police have never tortured prisoners.)

And as for the trial? It's a complete travesty. No, really it is. The judge (and jury and executioner because, yes, we're back in the dark ages apparently) is quite clearly anti-Human and believes that Jason is guilty. In fact, all of us Humans are guilty. We're all the same apparently. I just wanted to get a gun or something, grab Jason and get us out of there by whatever means necessary. And the atmosphere, the atmosphere in there was really frightening. It reminded me of during the Occupation... people motivated by hate and... well, it wasn't nice. And who was the first witness? Why, only our intelligence-challenged friend, Trasi the big-breasted barmaid. Well, she had obviously been coached as to what to say as she suddenly and miraculously had the ability to string sentences together. She also lied. Despite what she told me last night, she told the court that Jason had tried to chat her up. Lying cow. I nearly gave myself away at one point. She told the judge that she used 'psychology' when talking to her customers. After having spoken to her, I don't think she would even know what the word means! I laughed out loud and had to quickly hide behind my newspaper. She did manage to do a good job of setting Jason up though. She managed to convince the court that Jason was threatening Morton in some way and that this was why they had left together.

The next witness was Morton's personal secretary, a woman called Elayne H'Iggyns. I suppose that politely you could describe her as being handsome or distinguished. Jason would have said she had a face like a slapped arse. He always did have a way with words. She seemed to be devastated by Morton's death and, judging by the way she spoke, she had clearly been in some kind of a relationship with him. Probably some torrid affair. Actually, no, that's not fair. There's enough prejudice in this place without me adding to it. Who knows, maybe they had been in love? Stranger things have happened. Either way, I got the impression that, like Trasi, she wasn't telling the entire truth. She was also very keen to pin the blame on Jason or 'that Human' as they all kept referring to him.

Actually, can I just say how much that annoys me? It really really annoys me. I mean, I'm sure I didn't do that with the Fifth Axis. I didn't just lump them all together. Did I? And if I did, well, they were soldiers, weren't they? All members of the Fifth Axis were soldiers, whereas not all Humans are members of the Earth Empire. We're not all the same. And these people are Human! Sure, they've changed the spelling of their names as some kind of cultural affectation or political statement but they're as human as anyone I know.

She and the judge seem to be of the belief that Jason had drugged Morton and carried him to his room. There was something about Elayne, though. She was clever. She knew what she was doing. She

cried when she needed to. She looked innocent and confused when she needed to. She talked about how she wished she had done something, blah blah blah. Basically, she added a human element to what people had previously only seen as a political murder. The problem with such obvious manipulation is that so many seem to fall for it. I heard my fellow members of the public muttering angrily amongst themselves.

Then, she said something that sent a shiver down my spine.

‘I was the last one to see him alive.’

And, immediately, I began to wonder – what if she had been? The last one to see him alive, I mean. What if she and Morton had had a lover’s tiff?

‘It was so typical of him to drink and talk with anyone’ was what she had said. Was there some underlying anger there? Did Morton have a drink problem?

This would have presented her with a perfect opportunity!

Morton was drunk. Jason was drunk. As Morton’s secretary she’d have probably had a key to his room. She could have gone in and killed him and... but, then what about Jason? I’ll come back to that later. Motive and opportunity though. Ha ha! I’ve become Jessica Fletcher!

The only thing was that it was all so very convenient. Then, I remembered how Lyeden had lied about talking to Jason. What if she was involved too?

Or was I just looking for some ridiculous conspiracy? Either way, I knew I needed to confront Lyeden again and I needed to do it soon. I decided to leave the court and return to the Ritz. I stood up to leave when... Jason collapsed. He was in so much pain. I just wanted to... I just wanted to run over and hold him and tell him everything was going to be okay. I’d never seen him so weak and helpless. What was wrong with him? I knew I needed to get out, otherwise I’d not have been able to stop myself.

I ran out of the courthouse and, yes, I began to cry. I’m not afraid to admit it. I, Benny Summerfield, had a good old weep about everything. Then, I got angry. Really angry. There was something going on here. Elayne must have been the one to kill Morton and somehow she’d managed to get Trasi to orchestrate Jason being there so that she could set him up.

I went back to the Ritz and stormed straight into the bar. The boy behind the bar must have only been twenty and he looked quite terrified about something. Then, I realised it was probably me.

‘Where’s Trasi?’ I asked.

‘She’s... er, she’s gone,’ he replied.

He told me that his name was Damyan and that this was his first

day. Apparently the previous barmaid had left quite suddenly.

‘What do you mean she’s gone?’

‘I don’t know. I heard the manager say that she had come into some money and had handed in her notice. Apparently, she was devastated by the whole Morton murder thing and has decided to leave Verum.’ He looked at his watch. ‘Actually, she’ll have gone by now. She came back from the trial, collected her things and went to the Spaceport.’

‘And you don’t think that’s at all suspicious?’ I was shouting now.

‘I... I really don’t...’

‘What is it with you people?’

‘I’m just a barman. Sorry.’

I stormed out of the bar and back to my room. It would be too late to catch up with Lyeden now. Dammit. It has to be said that the people of Verum must number among the stupidest people I’ve ever met.

So, I’m sat here, wondering what to do now. I’ve put on the telly and watched a little of the trial. H’Iggyns is giving more evidence. More lies. I’m convinced that she’s behind all this. So I need to find some evidence of my own. No use me sitting here feeling sorry for myself. H’Iggyns is in the courthouse so now’s the perfect opportunity to do some digging. More later.

I’m exhausted. It’s been some day, I can tell you.

At first, I was going to visit the VPP offices, then I remembered that there was somewhere much closer to home. Elayne was staying in the same hotel as me. After everything I’ve done in my life, it wasn’t exactly difficult to find out which room she was staying in and get myself a key. And, no, it didn’t involve dressing up as a maid! Not that it would have been the first time I’d done such a thing for Jason’s benefit. Come to think of it, he did it once for me too. Sorry, getting distracted there! Anyway, Elayne’s room was identical to mine except much tidier. She had even unpacked her clothes and put them in the drawers which I didn’t think anyone bothered to do. I started to root through her stuff looking for love-letters or something. Something that would incriminate her. I found some letters from her husband which confirmed what I’d already suspected. He lived on Aequitas while she lived here on Verum. It was purely a marriage of convenience. There was no love in those letters. One thing though was that they weren’t addressed to the hotel but to a house on the other side of Millingdale. And they were addressed to a Marter Tailor.

I couldn’t find anything that suggested Elayne and Morton had been having an affair, so I decided to check out this Marter Tailor character. Why would Elayne’s husband be writing to her at a different address? Was Marter a friend of Elayne? Perhaps, she would

know the truth. I quickly left the room, locking the door behind me and ran down the stairs to the outside of the hotel.

The taxi journey was long and boring, with the driver keen to impart his pearls of wisdom about the Trial of Jason Kane. I nodded politely and replied through gritted teeth. I was getting quite good at keeping it all locked in. Eventually, he dropped me off at the address. It was a small, detached cottage on the outskirts of Millingdale and, considering the state of the rest of the town, it was actually quite pleasant. The garden was well kept with little yellow flowers lining the path. As I walked towards the house, I was surprised when suddenly the front door was flung open and an elderly woman appeared.

‘Yes?’

I explained to her that I was looking for Marter Taillor. I was Elayne H’Iggyns’ new secretary and had been sent here to collect something for the Trial.

‘How is it going? Have they found that Human guilty yet?’

I bit my tongue and explained that no, sadly they had not.

‘Well, you’d better come in then.’

The inside of the house was as well kept as the garden. It was quite homely really. The kind of place I could imagine me, Jason and Peter settling down in.

Away from it all. The old woman, Marter, asked me to take off my shoes and to try and keep quiet. She seemed innocent enough but there was something about her. There was something that I couldn’t quite put my finger on.

‘It’s a lovely place you have here. Nice and out of the way.’

Marter turned back towards me. ‘I prefer my own company.’

And I suddenly realised what it was.

‘I’m sorry, but are you Elayne’s mum?’ I remembered how Elayne, during her evidence, had said that she, unlike Morton, had preferred her own company.

Marter gave me a stare that Clarissa would have been proud of.

‘What? Well, yes, of course I am. What did you say your name was?’

‘Er... Clarissa. Clarissa Jones.’

‘Keep your voice down, girl! Now what is it you’re looking for exactly?’

I told her that it was some paperwork. Elayne had left some personal letters between herself and Morton there. I asked her if she knew where they were likely to be.

‘No. Why would I know? I’m just her mother. She doesn’t tell me anything.’

Marter wasn’t exactly the friendliest of people. Actually, she looked stressed about something. She looked like she hadn’t slept in weeks

and... and I suddenly realised why she had asked me to keep the noise down.

I recognised the tired, strained look in her eyes.

‘How’s the baby?’ I asked, innocently.

‘He’s asleep,’ she stopped and sighed. ‘At last.’

I laughed quietly. ‘Oh, I’ve been there. Elayne told me about him. How is young...?’

‘Kristoffa? Oh, he’s fine.’

Who is Kristoffa Taillor?

So now you know the truth. Now you know why Morton’s death has been my lifelong obsession.

He was my father.

Summerfield was right. Mark Morton and Elayne H’Iggyns had been having an affair. And I had been the result.

And that is why I cannot stand to hear people describing my father’s death as part of some grand conspiracy in which people like Kane and Mark Morton are dismissed as pawns. That is why two years ago, Claire Marsh’s words had had such an effect on me.

The sins of the father...

My grandmother, Marter, told me the truth shortly before she died. The other boys at school had already worked out that she wasn’t my real mother but I had had no reason to suspect otherwise.

I’ve got the video of the final moments of the trial playing as I write this. My mother’s anguished face is staring out at me. Summerfield may have been right about my parents’ relationship but just one look at my mother’s face would convince anyone that she wasn’t my father’s killer. She loved him but they could not be together. My father’s advisers had told him that he could not be seen to be responsible for the break-up of Elayne H’Iggyns’ marriage. It would have destroyed his political career.

If only they had gone public. Their careers would have been destroyed but they would both still be alive.

I hate Jason Kane for what he has done to my world but I hate him even more for what he has done to my family.

Summerfield is about to discover the truth about her oh-so-wonderful Jason Kane.

The diary of Bernice Summerfield (continued)

Marter Taillor explained to me how she was bringing up her grandson. Apparently, Elayne and Morton had been in love but the political situation had meant that they couldn’t be together. All Elayne had wanted to do was bring up her son with the man she loved.

Isn't that all any of us want to do?

Marter could see by the reaction on my face that I hadn't known about young Kristoffa. The poor woman looked exhausted and I almost felt guilty at having tricked her. She obviously loved her daughter and grandson and she was obviously deeply upset about Morton's death.

'He was such a good man. They really did love each other, you know. So what are you? A journalist?'

'Perhaps we could sit down.'

I realised that I'd done to Elayne what Verum had done to Jason. I'd made her a nice easy villain with a nice simple motive. Jason, the lovable rogue. Morton, the treacherous politician. H'Iggyns, the spurned lover. When will I learn? It didn't mean Elayne H'Iggyns hadn't killed Mark Morton but then... why would she have? They weren't just having an affair; they were in love. They had a son together. I asked Marter if perhaps Elayne and Mark had had an argument.

'I'm sorry, dear, but why should I tell you anything? I don't know who you are.'

'Oh. Well, obviously, that makes sense. Well...'

I wondered what to do. Should I tell her the truth? If she, like everyone else, believed that Jason was guilty then she might not take too kindly to his Human girlfriend turning up at her house. Then I looked into her eyes and saw something. She wasn't full of anger or hatred; she was just a sad, tired old woman. Perhaps it was about time that I gave someone here the benefit of the doubt.

'My name is Bernice Summerfield although I'd prefer it if you called me Benny. I am Jason Kane's... fiancé. I love him.'

Marter flinched.

'Please don't worry. I'm not here to hurt you or Kristoffa. I'm here because...'

Why was I there? What was I hoping to achieve?

'I'm here because Jason is innocent. I know him. I know that he would not kill another man. I know that he did not kill Mark Morton.'

Marter trembled as she spoke. 'But... he was in the room?'

'I know and I haven't worked out what happened yet but I know he didn't do it. Tell me, Marter, did you like Mark?'

She nodded.

'Well, wouldn't you like to see his real killer caught?'

'But, Jason Kane is -'

'A good and wonderful human being,' I interrupted her.

'So was Mark.'

'Then trust me.' I reached over and took one of her shaking hands. 'Please.'

She stood up and looked down at me.

‘My daughter did not kill Mark. That’s why you’re here isn’t it? You think they had some kind of argument and that she killed him?’

‘Honestly? Yes, that’s why I came here. That is what I thought.’

She walked over to a small wooden cupboard. She took something from it and gave it to me.

It was a picture of Morton, Elayne and a young boy less than a year old. They seemed to be at some kind of party. Kristoffa’s naming ceremony perhaps? All three of them were smiling.

And me, being the soppy wuss that I am, began to cry.

Marter handed me a cup of strong tea and a steady supply of tissues as I apologised. I explained that all I wanted was for my family to be together again.

‘I know I’m being pathetic but I just...’ I sipped at the tea. ‘I just don’t know what to do! Jason is innocent but I can’t seem to do anything about it.’

Marter smiled kindly as I poured my heart out to her. She was the first person I’d really been able to talk to since leaving Zardox.

‘You must really love him to do all this for him?’

‘I do.’ I was feeling drained. Perhaps I was too old for all this. ‘I just need to find something... some clue...’

‘Well, dear, I might be able to introduce you to a man who can help.’

I looked up, feeling groggy. ‘Who?’

And that’s when the whatever it was in the tea reached wherever it needed to reach and I passed out.

Surprise, the curse of Benny Summerfield, strikes again. Sweet old ladies are never what they seem.

I woke up with a splitting headache and carefully opened my eyes. Guess where I was? Yep, a dark room. I was handcuffed to a chair and a single spotlight was shining down on me.

‘Ah! This brings back memories!’ I said, to no one in particular. Despite the seriousness of the situation I couldn’t help but be reminded of my meeting with the actor I accused of being Gaylord T. Demento.

Then I heard the breathing. Someone else was in there with me.

‘Hello? I can hear you, you know. You might want to do something about your sinuses. Can I recommend –’

‘Hello Bernice.’ A man’s voice interrupted my groggy ramblings.

‘Oh?’ I tried not to sound surprised. ‘You know who I am?’

I could hear his footsteps as he walked around the room.

‘Bernice Surprise Summerfield. Here to gallantly save her ex-husband. Again.’

‘I’m sorry, have we met? Your voice doesn’t sound familiar. Perhaps

if I could see your face?’

The footsteps came closer.

‘You could walk a little quicker, you know. Although this is all very tense and exciting, I’m sure.’

The footsteps continued to approach.

‘Oh, come on! This is bloody ridiculous. Just show yourself!’

The footsteps continued to approach.

I began to hum the theme from *Jaws*.

And the footsteps continued to approach. My mind was racing through the possibilities. Perhaps it was Jason and he was possessed. Perhaps it was Damyan from the bar or the dodgy-looking taxi driver. Perhaps it was Elayne H’Iggyns with some kind of voice-modulator. Perhaps it was Mark Morton and he’d actually faked his own death. Or could the dark shape heading towards me be Marter Taillor in her real carnivorous alien form?

‘You’re not scaring me, you know.’ I continued my humming.

Then the footsteps stopped. He leant forward slowly and I could feel the breath on his face and then I saw him. And I saw that it was...

Someone I didn’t know and hadn’t met.

‘Damn!’ I was pissed off. ‘I was hoping you were going to turn out to be the person I least suspected. But you’re not even that! That’s just not fair.’

I paused. ‘Oh, and you’ve got a terrible zit on your nose. Would you like me to squeeze it for you? Oh, I’m sorry, my hands are tied.’

That’s it, Benny. Laugh in the face of adversity. Ha ha.

‘Allow me to introduce myself–’ he began.

‘Hah!’ I interrupted. ‘I win.’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘Oh don’t be. I had a little bet with myself that you would either say ‘Allow me to introduce myself’ or ‘So, Ms Summerfield, we meet again’ or ‘Why, Ms Summerfield, you have been causing me a few problems’. I suppose having a bet with myself really isn’t fair as obviously, I’m going to win either way. I’m sorry, I’m babbling. You were about to introduce yourself?’

It’s funny but suddenly I felt like myself again for the first time in ages. I’m not too good with the whole ‘emotions’ thing. I tend to try and find the nearest cupboard to hide in. And up until now, that’s what all this had been about. It had made me face up to how much I love him which quite frankly terrifies me. Hence the endless tears and general wussiness. Now, I had a good old honest criminal mastermind to fight. He would torture me for a while and accidentally reveal why he’d framed Jason for Morton’s death. I’d escape, rescue Jason and get the hell out of Dodge.

I was embroiled!

'My name is Jahn Davees and I'm the Commander of the Aequitas Security Service.'

'The what now?'

'The Aequitas Security Service.'

'As in A... S... S? As in ASS?'

'Yes, that's correct Ms Summerfield.'

'Okay.' He didn't seem to find it funny so why should I?

Davees was a quite average-looking man really. Average height, average build, forgettable face. Which was a shame. He should at least have had a scar or a hook for a hand or something. At least he wasn't stroking a cat.

'Nice to meet you Jahn. I'd shake your hand but...' I shrugged.

'But you're all tied up at the moment,' he smiled. 'Allow me.'

I tensed up as he walked around behind me and unlocked the handcuffs.

'Thanks Jahn. Can I ask why you killed Mark Morton and framed my fiancé?'

He came back around and stood in front of me with a look of complete confusion on his face.

'Er... I didn't.'

I started to laugh.

'What's so funny?' he asked.

'I don't know. I really don't.'

'I... er... I don't suppose you know where the Purpura Pawn is?' he asked, tentatively.

Tears started to roll down my face. 'I don't even know what it is!'

He too began to laugh. Well, I say laugh. It could have been laughing or crying; I wasn't a hundred per cent sure which.

A few minutes later, the two of us faced each other across Davees' desk. He was actually quite a jolly bloke and surprisingly talkative. He told me that I was in Millingdale's police station. He'd come to Verum from Aequitas shortly after Morton's murder. I asked him why.

'Well, why did you come here Miss Summerfield?'

'To rescue Jason. To find out the truth.'

'Well we'd,' he paused, 'I'd also like to prove Kane's innocence.'

I didn't know whether to believe him or not. In my too-many-to-mention years of experience, the nice guys often turn out to be the bad ones.

'But, and forgive me if I've got this wrong as this whole situation is giving me a bugger of a headache, if Jason is found guilty then isn't it much more likely that the people of Verum will choose to become part of Aequitas once more? Surely, it's in your best interests that Jason is found guilty?' I paused then continued, dramatically. 'He is, after all, a Human!'

Again, he was completely open.

‘Honestly?’

‘It’s usually the best policy.’

He leaned forward and switched on a radio. A news report was playing, the reporter telling us about a terrorist attack on an Earth Empire bank. Davees looked across at me, raising an eyebrow, as the reporter detailed the casualties. Two people dead with another seriously injured.

‘It’s terrible,’ I said.

‘Terrorist attacks usually are, Miss Summerfield. He switched off the radio. And, suddenly I realised what he was saying. ‘You don’t want Verum! Aequitas doesn’t actually want Verum back!’ He stood up and walked over to the window.

Aequitas isn’t part of any Empire. We’re surrounded by Empire worlds. We can’t trade with them and we can’t compete with them in any way. We’re a poor world, Bernice, and the last thing we need is to be lumbered with...’ He waved out across the dusty, miserable town of Millingdale.

‘But what about the people here?’

‘Just as many wish to stay part of the Empire. Whatever happens to Verum, half of the population is going to be up in arms. Literally, in this rabble’s case.’

I jumped up. ‘You did kill him! You killed Morton because his party were becoming successful in getting Verum out of the Empire. But why set Jason up? It doesn’t make any sense!’

‘What?’ He began to laugh. ‘Bernice! It makes perfect sense. Jason Kane killed Mark Morton. We just need to prove that he didn’t.’

Davees was perfectly relaxed whereas I was on the verge of hysteria. I sat down and breathed in deeply. Then he said the words I needed to hear. ‘Would you like to see him?’

‘Jason?’

‘Yes. I can take you to see him on one condition. You help us to prove his innocence.’

Davees left me alone in his office, locking the door behind him. I sat still, my mind racing. Davees must have killed Morton. Morton’s policies would probably have seen Verum come under Aequitas rule again but... but then why keep up the pretence? Why did he want my help to prove Jason’s innocence?

And why was he insisting that Jason had done it? I searched his room for a weapon of some sort. If I could break Jason out of the cells then we could just get away from here. But, of course, despite his cheerful manner, Davees wasn’t stupid. And what about Elayne H’Iggys and her mother? What was their involvement? I looked out of the window, across the dusty landscape as darkness fell. Then the

door opened and Davees reappeared.

‘It’s time.’

We walked down the dull grey corridors and towards the cells. The harsh fluorescent tube lights throbbed and buzzed over our heads. It was all very grim but I didn’t really care. I was going to see him again.

A blank-faced sergeant took us down another set of corridors and we continued our silent walk. Then, after what seemed like an eternity, we reached cell number twelve. The sergeant unlocked the door and it slowly swung open. The cell was dark and cold and I suddenly panicked. I couldn’t see him!

‘Benny?’ a voice whispered from inside.

I tried to speak but couldn’t.

Davees told me to go inside. He explained that they would have to lock me in but that when I was finished to give the sergeant a shout. As he turned to leave, I stepped into the darkness. I jumped as the door slammed shut behind me.

‘Benny? Is that you?’

Again, I tried to speak but couldn’t.

‘Benny?’

Then, my eyes becoming accustomed to the darkness, I saw him. I saw Jason. He was wrapped in a grey blanket and he looked... beautiful. I mean, obviously, he didn’t. He looked underfed and bruised and tired and ill and weaker than I’d ever seen him before but he was there. My Jason. He stood up, leaving the blanket on the ground. He was naked. He took a step towards me and I took a step towards him.

‘Benny? I...’ he began.

‘Ssh,’ I interrupted him. I walked up to him and stood still. I put a finger up to his lips.

‘Ssh.’

I began to peel off my jumper. Then my jeans. And then my underwear. And we made love.

Later...

‘What happened, Jason?’

I looked into his eyes as we lay on the cold concrete floor, wrapped tightly in each others’ arms.

‘I don’t know,’ he whispered. ‘I really don’t know.’

I told him that I’d been in the courtroom that morning. ‘I saw you collapse. The headaches? Are they the same as before?’

The headaches... none of us knew what they were or what was causing them. They’d started nearly two years before. Me, Jason, Adrian and Brax had found ourselves on some derelict mining station. It hadn’t been a particularly nice place and, to be honest, none of us

liked to talk about what had happened there. The things we'd said and done to each other... Anyway, we'd all tried to forget about it but, no matter how hard we tried, there had been a constant reminder. The thing there had done something to Jason – done something to his mind – and he'd started to suffer these crippling headaches. Brax immediately got him the best medical attention which had seemed to do the trick. At least, for a while anyway. Then, during the Occupation they'd started up again. There didn't seem to be any pattern to them. Jason would be fine for months then, without warning, he'd collapse to the floor, clutching his head, screaming in pain, unable to... there's nothing worse than seeing the man you love being so ill and helpless. Nothing worse than hearing him scream and there being absolutely sod all you can do to help him.

'I need to ask you a question, Jason.'

He shivered once more, so I held him tighter. I wanted to comfort him, to make him better but I needed to ask. 'Did you do it? Did you kill him? I won't judge you if you did. I'm sure there was a reason. If you can just explain it to me...'

His whispered answer chilled me.

'I can't remember.'

I told him about my meeting with Davees and how we were going to make sure he was found innocent but that it was important for him to not tell anyone who I was or that I was here.

'You've got to just keep quiet, Jason. Promise me that whatever happens, you'll just go along with whatever we do?'

His voice was weak. 'I promise'.

'I will get us through this.' I kissed him on the forehead then quickly stood up. 'We'll be back home with Peter before you know it. Trust me.'

'I do,' he whispered.

I couldn't look at him. I carefully walked over to the door and cheerfully, really really cheerfully called for the sergeant. He let me out and asked me if everything was okay. I restrained myself from punching his bloody lights out and walked back towards Davees' office, all the while doing my best not to think 'I'm too late. He's gone. Jason is gone.'

I'm quite proud of the fact that I didn't cry like a big girl. I needed to be strong. I reached Davees' office and breathed in deeply. I needed to stay calm. I wanted to burst in and kill him for what they'd done to the man I love but I didn't. I breathed deeply and I stayed calm. I knew I needed to keep on the right side of Davees if I was going to get us out of this alive. I needed his help and I needed information. That's it, breathe deeply.

And then, standing outside of his office, I got the information that I

needed. Oh Goddess, did I get the information I needed.

So, I'm writing this in the lovely little room that Davees has given me here at the station. He's told the Verum police that I'm a scientist from Aequitas, so they're all being oh-so nice and oh-so friendly.

The room certainly isn't as plush as the one I had in the Ritz or the one I had on Zardox but it's got a bed and if I can get the image of Jason being so utterly helpless out of my head, then I should be able to sleep. I need to sleep.

The diary of Bernice Summerfield (13/11/05)

Good morning!

How did I sleep? Not too great, thanks for asking. Got a grand total of about three hours and spent most of them having nasty dreams about other dimensions and haunted mining stations and the Occupation and nearly losing Jason over and over again. I can't stop thinking about Zardox and how much fun we'd had there. How can all that have been destroyed in such a short space of time? Why the hell did he come to this place? Goddess, I could will happily strangle whoever's responsible for all this!

Sorry. Regular readers of my diary (of which there should be none!!!) will know I'm not at my best in the morning!

So, I went to meet Davees in his office. He looked up as I sauntered straight in. Big Benny Summerfield grin on my face. Quips set to kill.

'Ah! Good morning, Bernice. Toast?'

'Don't mind if I do!' I replied. Cheerfully.

So I sat down and ate jam on toast with the bad guy. Makes a change from the usual torture and gloating, I suppose. Because he IS the bad guy. Oh, he's not the main bad guy but he's certainly one of them.

'Tea, Professor Summerfield?'

'That would be lovely, thank you Mr Davees.'

And, as he poured the tea he casually informed me that Jason's cell is bugged so he heard us making love. And, as I passed him the milk, I casually informed him that I'd overheard him talking to his mysterious blackmailing Purpurin' so I knew what their plan was. Touché!

I'm standing outside Davees' office, breathing deeply, trying to stay calm. And I listen as he talks to the electronically distorted voice.

DAVEES: – with him now.

PURPURIN: Good. That should keep her happy. She must not be harmed. Do you hear me, Davees?

DAVEES: Why is she so important to you, Purpurin?

PURPURIN: I have my own plans for Miss Summerfield. Trust me, if she is harmed then I shall quite simply crush you, your organisation and, indeed, the entire Domus System.

DAVEES: Like you crushed Mark Morton?

PURPURIN: He... upset me.

DAVEES: So you had him killed?

PURPURIN: If he had continued to supply me with the artefacts then we would all have been happy. None of this would have needed to take place. I knew about his little dalliance with Mrs H'Iggyns. I knew about his little bastard son. He said he thought it was time to go public and I wasn't willing to let that happen.

DAVEES: So you sent Kane to kill him?

PURPURIN: Perhaps. Perhaps not. It's not important. What is important is that you remember that I know about your crimes. I know what you did during the fight to free Aequitas from Empire rule.

DAVEES: It was a fight for our independence.

PURPURIN: The torture and rape of young women was a necessary part of this, was it?

DAVEES: Okay, Purpurin. Although, I still don't understand why you want to do this.

PURPURIN: I have my reasons. Remember, it is in your best interests that Verum remains part of the Empire.

DAVEES: Yes, but is it in your best interests?

PURPURIN: I'll explain it to you one last time, Mr Davees. We need to ensure that Mr Kane is found innocent. Then, we need to ensure that he is... disposed of.

DAVEES: Why?

PURPURIN: Mr Davees! You ask too many questions!

DAVEES: I have just one important question.

PURPURIN: How do you know that the Empire won't respond to Kane's death with an attack on Aequitas?

DAVEES: Exactly. We wouldn't stand a chance! We're going to prove that terrorists loyal to Aequitas killed Morton so therefore the Human Kane is innocent. We're then going to see that Kane is murdered, supposedly by those same terrorists. Let's be honest, the Empire isn't just going to stand by and not respond.

PURPURIN: Mr Davees, I'm the man the politicians have nightmares about. I have my own contacts on Earth, Mr Davees. The Empire will storm in, you're quite right. However, they will ignore Aequitas and focus their attentions on Verum.

DAVEES: And then?

PURPURIN: And then, everybody is happy.

DAVEES: What about Miss Summerfield?

PURPURIN: Yes, she can be rather difficult. Keep her happy. Tell her that Kane will be returned to her and then ensure that she gets off-world safely.

DAVEES: Fine. And Kane? He's due to give evidence tomorrow morning. What if he remembers something?

PURPURIN: I'll speak to Mr Konelli. Kane won't be speaking tomorrow. Indeed, it's unlikely that Kane will be speaking ever again.

DAVEES: I'd better go. The sergeant says Summerfield is on her way back.

PURPURIN: Very well. Remember, Mr Davees, I own you.

BENNY: – and I'll get back to you.

'Are you going to eat that toast?'

Davees put the toast down and closed his mouth.

'You're probably wondering what this is?' I showed him the communicator that Brax had given me. 'It's a communicating device. Like a police radio or a mobile 'phone. And like all good communications devices, it has an answering machine, a voicemail. "Hello, you've reached Benny blah blah blah but I'm too busy being embroiled in some kerrrazy adventure so leave a message after the beep." You understand?'

Davees nodded, silently.

‘Since I arrived here I’ve been using it to record the various conversations I’ve had at the Ritz and at Marter’s. That way, should someone drop themselves in it, I’d have it on record. I’d be able to use it to prove Jason’s innocence. Of course, it meant if anyone did call me they’d be a bit confused as to why they were suddenly listening to an illiterate bargirl banging on about my husband but I think it was worth it. Don’t you?’

Davees just stared at me then, very quietly, asked me what I was going to do.

‘Well, you want Jason to be found innocent. I want Jason to be found innocent. Our plans still pretty much dovetail nicely. Except, of course, for the Jason having an unfortunate accident thing. But that’s not going to happen now, is it?’

Davees, trying to regain his composure, took a sip of his tea. ‘Of course, there’s nothing to stop you both having unfortunate accidents.’

I took a bit of toast and grinned at him. ‘Except your Mr Purpurin doesn’t seem to want that to happen, does he? And I get the impression that he’s top dog around here. Anyway, I’ve been sending the recordings back to a friend. Anything happens to me and he’ll be down on you like a ton of bricks. So you’d have to face the mysterious Mr Purpurin and my friend Brax. And I’m not sure that you’d last that long against either of them.’

Davees nodded.

‘So? Who is he?’ I asked.

‘Purpurin?’

‘Yes. Who is this man who seems so keen to keep me alive?’

Davees said he didn’t know. ‘He contacted me about a month ago and said that if I didn’t do what he wanted me to, he’d... well, that he’d make public my little indiscretions during the war. That was the last I heard of him until the night of Morton’s murder.’

‘And you think that doing what he says is more important than justice? You’re willing to see an innocent man die just so that your secrets are kept safe?’

Davees carefully put his mug of tea down and looked directly at me. ‘Yes. If it means peace in the System, then yes.’

I asked him how they knew who I was.

‘I honestly don’t know. He told me that he knew you were here and that I needed to find you and bring you here. He knew that you’d end up at Marter Taillor’s house, so I warned her and gave her a perfectly safe drug that would knock you out. No permanent damage or anything.’

I tried to think who, here on Verum, knew what I was up to. Blank.

‘There’s a bigger picture here Davees, but at the moment I don’t

really care what it is. All I want is for me and Jason to get out of here alive. And you're going to make sure that that happens.'

Davees shrugged.

'I'll take that as a sign of "Yes I will help you Bernice just to save my own skin again" then?'

He shrugged again.

'Good. First thing we need to do then, is go through the evidence. I need to speak to Jason again.'

'He's at the courtroom now. He was supposed to be giving his own evidence today but...'

I interrupted him. 'But our friendly Mr Purpurin is making sure that doesn't happen.' I stood up. 'Breakfast's over, Mr Davees. It's time for us to work out how we're going to get Jason out of this.'

Davees bit into his toast. 'Purpurin's already got that sorted.'

'Of course he has.'

The 'Purpurin' Conspiracy

So how much of Summerfield's account is to be believed? For years after Morton's murder and the terrorist attacks on the courtroom and on the Empire ship Galloway, conspiracy theorists have hypothesised that there was some kind of behind-the-scenes machination. Am I now to believe that this is true? Am I now to believe that a mysterious, shadowy figure, calling himself 'Purpurin' was behind it all? It's all too convenient for me. One man was in such a position as to be able to manipulate Mark Morton, Roja Konelli, Jahn Davees and even people with authority in the Empire, like Matthew Barrister? Other than Summerfield's diary, there is no evidence to suggest that any of this is true. Yes, there have always been elements that could indicate a conspiracy – the third glass in the locked room, the light outside the car, Konelli's sudden decision not to allow Kane to give his evidence. But, at the end of the day, Jahn Davees was an honourable man who did want Verum to regain its independence from the Empire. He had spent years fighting for Aequitas's freedom – and Verum was part of Aequitas. There's certainly no evidence that he committed war crimes. Suddenly, this deeply patriotic man is now more concerned with Aequitas's economy than with Verum's freedom?

I think not.

And if I am to believe the Summerfield/'Purpurin' conspiracy then it would appear that I am responsible for my father's death. I am his 'little bastard son'. I refuse to accept this. I refuse to take seriously the word of a Human woman with obvious mental problems who, on one hand deplores the 'racism' (by which I think she means 'patriotism') on Verum and who then generalises the people here as being the 'stupidest' she has ever met.

My father was murdered by Jason Kane. Jason Kane was a drunk who suddenly found himself in the position to steal a valuable chess piece. He killed an innocent man and stole the Purpura Pawn. He caused the police car to crash, killing Sergeant Dy. He then left Verum and passed the artefact onto his Alien or Human associates. Then, as they tried to sell it on Earth, he, in an act of complete and utter arrogance, took his woman to the planet Zardox to appear on a base and worthless television game show.

We shouldn't look for patterns in the shadows when the simplest explanation is more likely to be the truth. One man killed Mark Morton. There was no conspiracy. Either Summerfield's actual diary is a fake or the contents within it are fiction.

The diary of Bernice Summerfield (13/11/05)

Okay. Update on what happened after our lovely breakfast. Davees told me about Purpurin's plan. Basically, we don't actually need to one hundred per cent prove Jason's innocence. We do, however, need to supply reasonable doubt that he's guilty. We're going to do this by giving some technobabbly bollocks about the needle pistol that was found in Jason's hands. Apparently, it's a particularly nasty thing that should or could have caused more damage than it did. All we need to do is to explain this and Konelli will find Jason innocent. I really don't like being involved in all this and Goddess knows what Purpurin has over Konelli but Davees seems to think it'll work.

I asked him what it was about the needle pistol and he explained that it should have disintegrated Morton entirely and caused quite a lot of damage to his room.

'So this does actually prove Jason's innocence?' I asked him.

'Not really,' he replied. 'It would be very easy to tamper with the weapon and localise its beam. In fact,' he shrugged, 'it doesn't really prove anything.'

'But it gives reasonable doubt?'

'Exactly!'

I really hated this. 'And because Konelli is in Purpurin's pocket and because people are generally stupid, they'll believe it because an "expert" will be telling them to.'

'Not just telling them,' he replied. 'We're going to show them. And it'll be on television which will make it all the more real. You'll probably become something of a celebrity.'

I gave him one of my finest withering looks. 'Been there. Done that.'

Again, I felt the tiniest twinge of guilt. I was helping out the bad guys here. I was going to help them get away with Morton's murder. But if this is what it takes to free Jason then, well, sod what's right or wrong. Life isn't that simple and I'm afraid that the fate of the man I

love is a thousand times more important than whatever's going on here. I'm tired. I want Jason and I want us both to be away from here.

(Typical Human arrogance. 'And you think that doing what he says is more important than justice? You're willing to see an innocent man die just so that your secrets are kept safe?' She doesn't even have the courage of her own convictions.)

I'm alone in Davees' office now. He's gone to contact Konelli's office to tell them an ASS agent (seriously that's what they're called!) will be giving evidence tomorrow. I'm going to take this opportunity to contact Brax so back in a mo.

Well, I told him the whole situation. He reckons I shouldn't trust Davees. Well, duh! Cheers for pointing out the patently bloody obvious, Brax! I sent him the recording of Davees talking to Purpurin, reminding him that it was my insurance so not to lose it. In his usual deadpan way he pointed out that my life was now in his hands. I just laughed and told him to sod off. That's the thing I like most about Brax. He always stays just that little bit detached from a situation, which, as I have a tendency to jump in feet first, eyes closed and then complain when it all goes horribly wrong, is great for calming me down. No matter what happens with Peter/Jason/Adrian and the associated emotional turmoil, I know that if I need a break I can go to Brax, grab a bottle of his wine and have a good old chat about early Ikkaban poetry or twentieth-century architecture or whatever.

'So, once again, you're going to rescue Jason and escape by the skin of your teeth? Is that the plan?'

'Well your plan wasn't exactly a roaring success, was it?' I rather smugly retorted. 'What happened to Adrian and Bev?'

He explained that Bev had apparently taken it upon herself to follow up another lead. He didn't sound too pleased about it, I can tell you. Brax doesn't like it when people don't do as they're told. And the other lead? Turns out that the Purpura Pawn thing was being sold on Earth! So, rather than come to Verum and help me, she'd figured that whoever was selling the Pawn was probably Morton's real murderer and that if she and Adrian found the Pawn, they'd find the aforementioned murderer and therefore be able to get Jason freed. It made a certain kind of sense, I suppose.

Unfortunately, according to Brax, they'd not had much luck and after getting themselves embroiled in an Exciting Adventure with Ancient Artefacts, Murderous Crooks and Goddess Knows What Else, they were now making their way back to the Collection. Brax took a perverse pleasure in pointing out that at least one of Peter's parents would be making it home in time for tea tonight, asking me what was going to stop Davees and Purpurin killing Jason anyway.

‘It’s simple, Brax. If Jason dies, then I’ll come back to Verum and I won’t rest until whoever’s behind all this is exposed. You’ve got the evidence there. I’ve already told Davees this. I think he can tell that I’m not lying.’

‘Indeed. Well, be careful, won’t you. I wouldn’t like to lose you.’

That’s about as emotional as Brax gets, bless him.

(It’s worth considering whether these ‘Bev Tarrant’ and ‘Adrian Wall’ characters were involved in the murder of Preston Antrim – and therefore in the theft of the Purpura Pawn. Were Kane, Tarrant and Wall working together? Was Summerfield unaware of what was really going on with her friends? I’ve mailed Claire Marsh a copy of Summerfield’s diary to see if she can find any trace of Tarrant and Wall in her grandfather’s reports.)

Davees returned after that, so we continued to discuss the plan. He started to tell me how one of his agents was going to give the evidence when I interrupted him.

‘I’m going to do it.’

As expected, he coughed and spluttered. I explained that frankly, I didn’t trust him and that I wanted to make sure that the right evidence was given. Eventually, he agreed that I could be the ASS agent, something I’m sure Jason would be very happy about. His only concern is that if Jason doesn’t die then Purpurin’s whole plan will be ruined. He’s terrified of the consequences. I told him that I didn’t give a stuff, so he’s going to talk to Purpurin this evening. In the meantime, we’re going to turn me into a Scientific Expert.

It was a *long* afternoon. I’m not the most scientific of people anyway, so it’s lucky that this is all just a ruse and that Konelli’s going to be in on it. It’s quite simple really. I’m going to fire the needle pistol and show the damage it can cause. Then I’m going to explain that it’s therefore impossible for Jason to have done it. Must remember to refer to Jason as Kane though. Davees supplied me with a disguise in case anyone might recognise me from being in the public gallery. The bed-wettingly sexy Professor Benny Summerfield will become the cold, aloof, red-headed Doctor Monica Dagellan. We spent far longer than strictly necessary coming up with the name. Dagellan came from where I first met Jason and Monica came from Davees getting annoyed at my dithering. He shouted that I just needed a name or a moniker and that it didn’t really matter what it was. I thought this was quite ironic considering the supposed political statement they were all making here but I decided to save my lecture on the importance of names for another day.

Then he told me that Purpurin had given his assurance that Jason would be allowed to go free. They’re going to stage his death.

‘What do you mean by stage?’ I asked, concerned.

‘Konelli is going to find him innocent of Morton’s murder but will ask that he be kept in the cells while further investigation takes place. Everyone will see him returned to his cell when, in actuality we’re going to escort him out of the courtroom. He’ll then be driven to your ship. At the same time, though, we’ll be telling the media that he, for reasons unknown, hung himself in his cell.’

‘Just remember Jahn. My friend has the evidence that can bring all this out in the open. If Jason isn’t –’

He interrupted me. ‘I give you my word, Bernice.’

The look on my face must have shown my lack of confidence in that particular phrase. ‘Despite what you might think, I’m not some evil man looking out for himself in all this. I’m doing this for Aequitas.’

I ignored him and made my way to Jason’s cell. Davees had said I could spend the night there if I wanted. I did want.

The diary of Bernice Summerfield (14/11/05)

I think spending the night with Jason has made him feel just that little bit better. He’s still terrified though. Not just about what will happen but also about what might have already happened. He has no memory of any of it. I told him that we just needed to concentrate on getting us both out of here. He said that he loved me and that he trusted me. He has complete faith in me.

Which is more than I have.

Saying goodbye to him this morning was the hardest thing I think I’ve ever had to do. If I get this wrong then who knows what could happen to him. I also have to rely on the word of someone who may or may not have committed serious war crimes. What if Davees is lying? Brax has the proof so he knows I’ll come back if anything happens to Jason but what if he doesn’t care? Right, deep breath, no more ‘what if’s. We’re going to be fine. I go in, point a weapon at a dummy, fire it and then – boom – it’s all over and we can go home. It’s simple.

Davees is knocking on the door now. He’s going to drive me to the flyer which we’re going to park nearer the courtroom. Going to need to make a quick getaway. Once we’ve done that, it’ll be time for Doctor Monica Dagellan to give her evidence and save Jason Peter Kane.

Okay then. Fingers crossed.

Well, I’ve done my bit and played my part. I’m on the flyer now waiting for them to bring Jason to me. We’ll soon be back home. I don’t think either of us will be taking a holiday for quite some time. Not after all this.

If anything, the atmosphere in the courtroom was worse than it had

been before. I could really feel the hatred in there. And what made it all worse was that it all seemed so futile. I mean, I'm not saying the media here have manipulated it all but with their Jason and his little devil horns and their over-the-top news broadcasts, I can't help wondering how much the people here actually do care. Certainly, the people I've spoken to have been more concerned with money and love and sex and children and just with the stuff that life is actually about. The situation on Zardox had been completely ridiculous but was it any more foolish than this? At least the people there were honest about what mattered to them.

Monica Dagellan gave evidence to prove Jason Kane's innocence.

I quickly left the courtroom and I'm now waiting for him.

Still waiting.

Come on, Davees. Where's Jason? I don't want to tune in to their news broadcasts as I'm not sure I can cope with hearing about his 'death'. I know it won't be real but I still don't want to hear it.

Still waiting.

Okay, I'm going to tune in the flyer's telly and see what's happening. Looks like there's been another terrorist attack so I'll get back to you.

The 'Purpurin' Conspiracy

And that's it. It's all over. The courtroom was bombed and everyone died. My mother died and now, forty years later, I'm discovering the truth as to why.

The diary of Bernice Summerfield (14/11/05)

The flyer's on autopilot and on its way back to the Collection.

The terrorist attack was on the courtroom. Davees bombed the courtroom. Everyone in it died. Jason. He was there. They replayed the last few moments over and over again. It was just after I left. Jason shouts at the camera about how I'm the woman he loves. Then the picture goes black. Then we cut to outside and the building is no longer there. It's gone. He's gone. They played the last few minutes over and over again. The 'hanging' story was a lie. Jason was found innocent and then killed in the explosion.

I sat there watching it. I didn't cry. I did feel a pain in my chest. I think I might even have had a heart attack. I don't know. Even now I'm not sure if I'm breathing.

It wasn't that I couldn't believe he was gone. It was more that I couldn't contemplate it as even a possibility. Jason couldn't be dead. I could see him in my head. Stumbling out of the loo on the way to Zardox. Scruffy and obnoxious. Gorgeous and caring.

The man I love.

And I look over at him now, unconscious in the co-pilot seat. And I can't believe that he's here.

As I was watching the news reports on the courtroom bombing, he just appeared in the co-pilot's seat. There was a sound like a quiet... roar and a kind of reddish light as he was somehow transmatted into the flyer! I still don't understand how. I mean, the people here certainly don't have that sort of technology. Our Mr Purpurin must have access to some kind of alien, or at least advanced, technology.

I should care. The old Benny Summerfield would be turning the flyer around and heading straight back to Verum. The old Benny Summerfield wouldn't be leaving any stone unturned. The old Benny Summerfield wouldn't have rested until she knew exactly what was going on. Who was Purpurin? Was Davees behind the courtroom bombing? What was the significance of the Purpura Pawn?

But, I'm not the old Benny Summerfield any more.

His eyes flickered open and he looked up at me.

'Well, go on then,' he muttered. 'Have a go at me. Make the sarky comments. This is another fine mess you've gotten me into, Jason Kane.'

I leant forward and kissed him gently on the lips. 'I think we're a bit old for all that, aren't we? I'm just so utterly utterly pleased that you're safe. We're going home.'

He looked shocked.

'Oh, don't worry,' I continued. 'I'm sure once the initial shock has passed I'll be back to normal.'

He started to laugh. A laugh which turned into a hacking cough. I told him to try and get some rest.

'I love you, Benny,' he said, as he fell asleep.

We're not far from the Collection now. Like I say, the flyer's on autopilot, so I'm just watching him sleep. He always looks so innocent when he's asleep. Getting a message from Brax. Back in a mo.

Well, Brax is happy that we're safe and...

Right, I'm going to write this down but I don't believe it for a minute. It's just Brax not understanding the way things are. It has to be.

We were talking and I was explaining the whole situation and... well, then he asked me a question that shouldn't even mean anything.

'Are you sure Jason didn't do it?'

I mean, of course he didn't. I have known Jason for what must be about ten years. I love him. I trust him. He's probably the only constant I've had over the last few years. I do love him. I do trust him.

But... sitting here, in a small spaceship, just me and him, I'm

reminded of how we first met. And... and of how he had been able to fool me. It was just a practical joke, really, but he had been able to fool me.

But I know him now. We've been through everything together. I know who he is.

But... I didn't know about his fame on Zardox, did I? I'm sure, though, there are things he doesn't know about me. I mean, that's who we are. You get some couples and one of them will be the exciting, live-life-to-the-full type and one will be the dull, stay-at-home type. We're not like that. We've both got pasts. We've both done stuff, both good and bad.

So, I'm looking over at him as he sleeps and I'm wondering what's going through his mind and I'm thinking how there's so much more to him than 'Jason Bloody Kane'.

The Purpurin Conspiracy

So what is the truth? Even Summerfield suspected Kane by the end. But, if I believe that the diary is a genuine document, then I have to believe that there was this conspiracy behind it all.

I can find no official trace of a Bernice Summerfield, Jason Kane, Adrian Wall, Bev Tarrant or Irving Braxiatel. It is as if they never existed. But, the corpses of people like Preston Antrim on Earth and Mark Morton on Verum are proof that they did exist.

I've just received a mail from Claire Marsh. She has now read Summerfield's diary and has found some interesting connections with her grandfather's final records – namely that Matthew Barrister, the Empire representative who died when the Galloway was destroyed – was also under investigation by Dexter Braughtigan: in connection with the theft of the Purpura Pawn. Could it be true? Could this all be a huge conspiracy? Was my father just one of the pawns? And my mother? Jahn Davees? Matthew Barrister?

Were they all killed because of the Purpura Pawn? Were they all killed because of the relics of a long-dead civilisation? Were they all killed because my father no longer wished to keep my existence a secret? Were they all killed because of me?

Claire says that she needs me to come to Earth. There's a name that appears in Braughtigan's files. She suspects he might have something to do with it he may even be the mysterious Purpurin. She doesn't want to discuss it over the 'net for obvious reasons.

So I'm sat here with my bags packed and my ticket held firmly in my hand. I'm sat here, waiting to visit the home planet of Jason Kane. I'm sat here, frankly terrified.

This is it. I'm going to find out the truth.

The truth behind our history.

EDITOR'S NOTE

This book is published as a tribute to Kristoffa Taillor. It is published in his memory.

Kristoffa Taillor did indeed travel to Earth. He met Claire Marsh on a spacedock orbiting the planet. Ironically, they met in a restaurant called the Final Rest.

Within moments of their meeting, they were dead. Witnesses described them as convulsing in pain, blood pouring out of their noses and ears. Post mortems revealed that they had been poisoned.

The man who served them at the Final Rest, a Human waiter called Dev Kernan, was then admitted to the spaceport's sick bay, suffering from an extreme migraine. He soon fell into a coma and has never regained consciousness.

This book isn't just published in Kristoffa Taillor's memory. It's published in the memory of Claire Marsh and of all those who, over the last forty years have suffered in their search for the truth.

This book is published in the memory of the truth. Something, we here on Verum, really do seem to have known little off. We call for the Empire to instigate an official inquiry so that the truth behind what has created our society can be discovered.

And in another time and another place, Irving Braxiatel smiles as he looks across his Collection... and he thinks about all that he owns, especially the pawn once more waiting to be sacrificed...

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He's on trial for his life, accused of stealing the legendary
Purpura Pawn - and somehow everyone else has to try and find
a way to help him. But is someone out to stop them doing so,
no matter what the cost?

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Table of Contents

I Zardox Break

Prologue

One

Two

Three

Four

Five

Six

Seven

Eight

Nine

Epilogue

II The Purpura Pawn

One

Two

Three

Four

Five

Six

III On Trial